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ABSTRACT

This study examined reasons for the success of eight high-performing California elementary schools with high numbers of impoverished students. Interviews with principal focused on teaching methods, curriculum, content standards, test scores, teacher professional development, safety, discipline, local decision making, parent involvement, emergency teacher certification, obstacles to student performance, and reasons for success. Principals were strong leaders with clear visions of what worked and what did not work. Rather than sticking with ineffective theories and methods, they emphasized what worked in the real world. Many schools ignored the move toward whole-language reading instruction and remained with phonics-based instruction. Principals emphasized the importance of the type of curriculum chosen to teach a particular subject. A well-implemented, research-proven curriculum was key in determining student performance. The schools used the Open Court reading curriculum, supported teacher-directed instruction, and had well-planned strategies to ensure that students acquired standards-based knowledge. Principals encouraged frequent testing to discover students' and teachers' strengths and weaknesses. Professional development emphasized subject matter and implementation of state standards. Most schools were more interested in teacher qualities than teaching credentials. None reported major discipline problems, relating this fact to higher achievement. Principals emphasized parent involvement in their schools. They cited teacher quality as a key reason for high achievement (Contains 25 notes.). (SM)

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HIGH-POVERTY, HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS IN CALIFORNIA

BY
LANCE T. IZUMI

WITH
K. GWYNNE COBURN AND MATT COX

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Pacific Research Institute

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SEPTEMBER, 2002
PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In California, there are a handful of high-performing public schools that also have high numbers of students from high-poverty homes. Why have these schools succeeded while so many others with similar demographics have failed? In order to answer this question, the authors of this study conducted interviews with principals at eight high-poverty, high-performing public elementary schools.

Principals at these schools were asked an assortment of probing questions about curriculum, teaching methods, the state academic content standards, assessment, teacher professional development, safety and discipline policies, teacher quality, and parental involvement. Their responses were instructive.

READING INSTRUCTION

"There is nothing more important than [language arts and reading]. Everything is based on that. We teach reading all day. When we pick up the social studies, we're teaching reading."

–Principal, Kelso Elementary School

ON THE SCRIPTED PHONICS-BASED OPEN COURT READING CURRICULUM:

"I think that previously in some other districts and schools you have classrooms where everybody kind of does their own thing as far as language arts or any subject area is concerned, but with this program it keeps everyone focused in the same direction."

–Principal, Payne Elementary School

ON IMPROVED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AFTER SWITCHING TO A PHONICS-BASED READING CURRICULUM:

"We saw growth, we saw improvement, we saw more commitment."

–Principal, Robert Hill Lane Elementary School

ON THE BENEFITS OF A SCRIPTED CURRICULUM:

"[Teachers] know exactly what to teach. They know what day or what week to teach it on. It's planned out for them."

–Principal, Bennett-Kew Elementary School

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STATE ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS:

"Everything we have here is content-standards driven."

–Principal, Hudnall Elementary School

"One thing I did this year, I collected lesson plans [from teachers] and I keep them on file every week. And in the lesson plans they are required to indicate what standards were addressed during that particular lesson plan."

–Principal, Payne Elementary School

"But it's all about expectations.... Because if you set high expectations and communicate them to children, then they in turn will work hard to meet those expectations.... It has nothing to do with your socioeconomic level; it has nothing to do with your ethnicity or any of these things."

–Principal, Hudnall Elementary School

"You get what you expect. The classrooms and the teachers that do well are those that have high expectations."

–Principal, Robert Hill Lane Elementary School

"We're trying to push the idea of believing in yourself, work hard, get smart. We try to push the idea that how well you do has a lot to do with how much you put into it, how much you do."

–Principal, Solano Elementary School

ON STANDARDS AND LIMITED-ENGLISH-PROFICIENT STUDENTS:

"They may be rigorous standards but then there's a way of breaking them down so they can be understood, especially by English language learners."

–Principal, Payne Elementary School

INSTRUCTION METHODS

ON TEACHER-CENTERED VERSUS STUDENT-CENTERED INSTRUCTION:

"I have been in many schools and I see that an effective school is one in which when you walk into a classroom at any time, on any day, you see teachers teaching."

–Principal, Robert Hill Lane Elementary School

ON THE DISADVANTAGES OF A STUDENT-CENTERED CURRICULUM:

"Students need structure first of all," and if a student is supposed to learn something "and the major input is from the student, how do students determine what their needs are?"

–Principal, Hudnall Elementary School

ON SWITCHING FROM STUDENT-CENTERED TO TEACHER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION:

"We've come through a transformation. The fun cutesy things, you don't see that anymore."

–Principal, Robert Hill Lane Elementary School

ASSESSMENT

Without assessment, you will not know "that Johnny needs help with spelling" or "that Johnny is not decoding right."

–Principal, Payne Elementary School

ON WHY FREQUENT ASSESSMENT IS IMPORTANT:

"You don't wait until the end of the year to say that this kid can't read."

–Principal, Bennett-Kew Elementary School

ON MAKING USE OF TEST DATA:

"We use data from our SAT–9 every year to see how well we did. We do a personal grade-level analysis. We do a school-wide analysis. Teachers do an individual analysis of how well they did. So they can see if there is improvement, what kind of change did they effect, and whether they were successful."

–Principal, Robert Hill Lane Elementary School

OTHER ISSUES

ON WHETHER A TEACHING CREDENTIAL EQUATES TO TEACHER QUALITY:

"[Teachers at our school] do not evaluate a person based on whether they're fully credentialed, but instead question if someone is going to fit into our family, our way of thinking, our belief that all children can learn."

–Principal, Vanalden Elementary School

ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DISCIPLINE AND LEARNING:

"That's one thing I don't tolerate and I let all the teachers know that you're not going to let one kid take the learning away from 32.... I'm a strong believer in discipline. I believe a school cannot operate if it's not disciplined."

–Principal, Payne Elementary School

"We have rewards and sanctions. You break a rule on the playground you get a warning, you might have to sit by the fence. You break a rule a second time or you break one of the big rules like throwing rocks and you get a ticket."

–Principal, Hedrick Elementary School

ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM:

"The kids seem very enthusiastic. They're much more confident."

–Principal, Robert Hill Lane Elementary School

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ON RED TAPE CONTAINED IN EDUCATION PROGRAMS:

"If you were to take away some of the paperwork in compliance we would have more time as administrators and instructional leaders in the classrooms to deal with those issues that will effect change and will affect learning."

Principal, Robert Hill Lane Elementary School

"All the stuff with Title I and with bilingual, it just drives me nuts."

Principal, Solano Elementary School

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For lawmakers and education policymakers, then, there are a number of lessons to be learned from these schools that have overcome high poverty to achieve high performance. First of all, excuses such as low income, family background, racial diversity, limited English proficiency, and standardized test bias are invalid and should be ignored. Schools can overcome these challenges by focusing on key factors that include:

- Empirically proven research-based curricula.
- Empirically proven research-based teaching methods.
- Comprehensive use of the state academic content standards as goals for student learning, guideposts for teaching, and tools for professional development.
- Use of frequent assessment as a diagnostic tool for identifying student and teacher strengths and weaknesses and for improving student and teacher performance.
- Standards-based professional development that emphasizes subject matter.
- Teacher quality and teacher willingness to use proven curricula and methods.
- Strong discipline policies that emphasize sanctions and rewards.
- Increased flexibility to use available funding and a reduction in bureaucratic rules.

If all public schools, their districts, and the state adopted these strategies, the quality of education for California's children would rise quickly and dramatically. The principals cited in this report have described what works. The next step should be to replicate their reforms in all of the state's underachieving schools.

As these schools prove, there are no excuses for failure.

INTRODUCTION: INVESTIGATING HIGH PERFORMANCE

In March 2001, the California State Assembly convened a special hearing to investigate why a small number of public schools with large percentages of low-socioeconomic students ranked so high on the state's Academic Performance Index (API). These schools, where most students were minority and eligible for the government-subsidized free-lunch program, would normally be regarded as low performing. Yet, these schools have overcome negative stereotypes and condescending assumptions and have succeeded. Why?

At the hearing, principals and teachers were asked to explain the reasons for the high performance of their students. There were some very intriguing insights. A teacher at Hedrick Elementary School, located in Imperial County on the U.S.–Mexico border, told legislators that much of her school's success stemmed from the use of a phonics-based reading program. As an example, she cited one year, when, for budget reasons, the school decided to drop the program. Test scores and reading proficiency fell noticeably. In response, the phonics program was re-instituted and scores and proficiency improved. Interestingly, this decline and rise in scores and proficiency all took place in a school with 100-percent credentialed teachers. One could logically conclude, then, that it was the curriculum that held the key to higher performance.

Much of the questioning by legislators at the hearing, though, focused precisely on issues such as teacher credentials, plus parental involvement programs, student assemblies, and other activities that only modestly affect student performance, if at all. Critical questions involving curricula, instructional methodologies, teacher professional development, and safety and discipline were largely overlooked. Yet, research has shown that factors such as curricula and teaching methods strongly determine the level of student achievement.

In order to answer these important questions, the Pacific Research Institute (PRI) conducted in-depth interviews with principals at eight high-poverty, high-performing California elementary schools. The schools were chosen based on a number of factors. First, elementary schools were chosen because of the critical importance of building a foundation of basic knowledge and skills upon which subsequent learning depends.

Second, the schools chosen have at least 80 percent of their students on the government-subsidized free-lunch program. In order to ensure that the high performance of the school was due to the general performance of its low-income students, not the achievements of a minority of more affluent students, PRI set a challenging criterion of requiring that the school have at least four out of five students on the subsidized-lunch program.

Third, the school must have received a ranking of seven or above on the API. The API ranks a school from a low of one to a high of 10 based on the Stanford–9 test scores and the scores from the California

Standards Test in English Language Arts of students at the particular schools. Although some analysts label a high-poverty school as high performing if it achieves a five ranking on the API, the fact is that the state considers a school with a five ranking as low performing and eligible for the various rewards and sanctions in the state's accountability program. Rather than view borderline low performance or mediocrity as high performance simply because of a school's demographics, PRI wanted to focus on schools that were high performing by everyone's standards; hence, the authors chose the API cutoff of seven and above.

Finally, the schools PRI interviewed have a significant percentage of African-American and/or Hispanic students. Given the general lag in test scores among students from these ethnic groups, PRI believes that it is important to focus on schools that are succeeding in raising the achievement of these students.

It is of note that of the hundreds of high-poverty elementary schools in California, only a handful fit the criteria chosen by PRI. In other words, the schools described in this report are not a small selective sample of the state's high-poverty, high-performing schools, but represent the bulk of such schools. This makes the lessons learned at these schools even more critical.

During the interviews, the authors of this paper asked principals a series of questions designed to address key issue areas including curricula, teaching methods, and professional development. Their responses, not surprisingly, dovetailed with the findings of quantitative experimental research data. In reading their responses, there may appear to be repetition, but that repetition is important because it indicates that there is likely a common formula for success. The following are among the questions that were put to the principals:

- What curriculum do you use in reading and math? What flexibility do you have in choosing your curriculum and textbooks?
- What teaching methods do you use? What is your opinion of teaching methods that stress drill and practice?
- Do you use the state academic content standards? How?
- Do you use individual SAT–9 test scores of students as a diagnostic tool to improve student and teacher performance?
- What type of teacher professional development do you encourage? Is there a subject matter emphasis?
- What is the safety and discipline history of your school? Is there a connection between the academic performance of your students and safety and discipline issues?
- What tools of local control of decision-making are used at your school?
- What strategies do you use to promote parental involvement?
- How many emergency-credentialed teachers do you have? Does a credential equate to quality?
- What is the biggest obstacle that your school faces in continuing to improve student performance?
- What is the most important factor that explains the success of your school?

High achievement despite high poverty is possible, but it is crucial that we understand exactly what causes high achievement and not be distracted by emotionally satisfying but non-causal activities. The principals' responses, plus the narratives describing these schools and their operation, should aid lawmakers and education policymakers in crafting programs that will improve the achievement of all students, but especially those from diverse low-income backgrounds.

Before discussing the responses of the school principals, background must be given on the teaching method called direct instruction.

DIRECT INSTRUCTION

In interviewing the principals and observing classroom practices, the authors found that most of the schools used direct-instruction methods. Since the principals often refer to this teaching method, an explanation will help readers better understand the principals' responses and recommendations.

In general terms, teaching methods can be categorized as either teacher centered or student centered. Teacher-centered methods focus on teachers as the key transmitters of knowledge. Student-centered methods place children in the primary role of knowledge seekers because of their supposed inherent curiosity and desire to learn, while teachers assume a secondary role, usually as facilitators. Supporters of student-centered methods, who widely populate the faculties of university schools of education, believe that if teachers teach too much and too directly it will inhibit children and diminish their interest in learning. Consequently, they view direct instruction, which is one form of teacher-centered learning, with scorn.

Direct instruction is characterized, generally, by teaching in small, logically sequential steps with student practice after each step, guiding students after initial practice, and ensuring that all students experience a high level of successful practice.[1] More specifically, direct instruction emphasizes the use of carefully planned lessons designed around highly specific knowledge and well-defined skills for each subject. Direct instruction asks teachers to use "presentation books," which are lesson plans that feature highly scripted, rapid-paced instruction. These presentation books give teachers instructions for monitoring and assessing student progress, and for providing immediate feedback to students. Students are tested frequently in order to monitor their progress.[2]

In interviewing the principals and observing classroom practices, the authors found that most of the schools used direct-instruction methods.

Sig Englemann, the famed direct instruction pioneer at the University of Oregon, believed that children would generalize their learning to new untaught examples and situations if they could respond perfectly to smaller sets of carefully engineered tasks.[3] In practice, University of Wisconsin education researchers Mark Shug, Sara Tarver, and Richard Western note that this theory sequences classroom learning activities for children with teachers using "a complex system of scripted remarks, questions, and signals, to which children provide individual and choral responses in extended, interactive sessions."[4] Students also do written work in workbook and activity sheets.

In layman's terms, Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities and now a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, has written:

> Direct Instruction teachers, operating from detailed scripts, tell kids what they need to know, rather than letting them discover it for themselves, as ed schools advise. Direct Instruction

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> teachers drill students on lessons (a method education professors sneeringly call "drill and kill"). They reward right answers and immediately correct wrong ones, flying in the face of ed-school dogma downplaying the importance of accuracy.[5]

Direct instruction is, therefore, a teacher-centered, not student-centered, method. Use of direct instruction has obvious implications for the way in which reading, math, and other core subjects are taught.

For example, direct instruction is associated with phonics reading instruction for a variety of reasons, including the sequential nature of phonics instruction (e.g., moving from letter recognition to letter/sound recognition to reading based on sounds) and the emphasis on review and practice. The increasingly popular Open Court phonics-based reading curriculum, published by SRA/McGraw-Hill, uses a direct-instruction approach. Since many of the schools that will be discussed in this paper use Open Court and credit it for a significant part of their success, it is worthwhile to discuss this reading program in more detail.

Open Court emphasizes systematic explicit instruction in teaching phonics, reading, and writing. According to SRA/McGraw-Hill, "explicit instruction involves specific, teacher-directed presentation of lesson content to students (including teacher modeling) followed by student practice, then assessment."[6] The publisher also says:

> Systematic instruction is that which follows the most logical sequence of skill presentation and employs effective learning routines. Teaching skills in progression allows students to learn concepts in increasing complexity so that, once they learn basic concepts, they have the background knowledge to help them understand more difficult concepts. It is like building scaffolding: from the bottom to the top, each layer supports the one above it.

Open Court uses systematic lesson plans that reduce prep time and eliminate guesswork for teachers, and that include three key parts. The first part is targeted at lesson plans in kindergarten and first grade and focuses on skills for beginning reading including phonemic awareness, phonics, and word knowledge skills. Letter names, sounds, and spellings are learned in sequence so that students are able to read complete words in a short time. Practice and review of key skills ensure mastery.

The second part of every lesson plan, regardless of grade, uses literature to demonstrate and practice comprehension. Comprehension strategies and skills include clarifying, summarizing, predicting, sequencing, and drawing conclusions. Students also learn how to generate questions and find answers through the explicit teaching of inquiry and investigation strategies. Teachers and students use a concept/question board to post questions to spur discussion.

Finally, part three of every lesson changes the focus from gathering ideas to communicating them. Students are explicitly taught the writing process, the different genres of writing, and grammar and usage. There is also explicit instruction in spelling, vocabulary, and penmanship.[7]

Especially important for low-income and ethnic minority student populations, the publisher states that "No assumptions are made about students' prior knowledge—each skill is systematically taught and

explicitly taught in a logical progression, to enable understanding and mastery."[8] Within the lessons, Open Court allows for interventions for students who need more intensive support, English-language development for students with limited English proficiency, reteaching lessons for those students who need extra practice, and challenge activities for students working beyond grade level.[9] Thus, Open Court is geared to all students, no matter what their demographic background and regardless of whether reading is encouraged in the home.

Open Court makes use of continuous assessment of students to provide benchmarks for evaluating student performance throughout the school year. Among the assessments used: a pre-test at the beginning of the year that guides and informs instruction; a mid-year and post-test give teachers an opportunity to monitor student progress; unit assessments monitor students' understanding of phonics, comprehension, and language arts; a diagnostic assessment provides more focused assessment to aid in individualized instruction; and test preparation and practice workbooks help teachers prepare students for standardized tests such as the SAT–9.[10]

That many of the schools analyzed in this report used direct instruction is unsurprising given the empirical evidence supporting the superiority of direct instruction over other teaching methods.

Finally, Open Court provides a wide array of textbook materials including readers, decoder texts, phonics packages, writing books, practice books, oversized books for whole class instruction, teacher support materials, and other various tools.

As will be seen in the school profiles, there was more diversity in the type of math curricula used. However, a number of the schools did use the direct-instruction Saxon math program. The Saxon program is characterized by practice devices to ensure student mastery of mathematical facts and skills, scripted lessons that provide strategies that enable students to construct mathematical concepts, in-class practice guided by the teacher, and frequent assessment. Saxon emphasizes incremental increases in knowledge development and continual practice and review.[11]

That many of the schools analyzed in this report used direct instruction is unsurprising given the empirical evidence supporting the superiority of direct instruction over other teaching methods. Engelmann and his University of Oregon colleague G.L. Adams, in their comprehensive 1996 review of direct-instruction research, analyzed 34 different studies that compared direct instruction to other methods. Englemann and Adams found that direct instruction was effective in improving overall student achievement, as well as achievement in specific subjects such as language, reading, mathematics, spelling, health, and science. More important, they found that on most comparisons children taught through direct instruction performed better academically than children taught through student-centered methods.[12]

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A 1999 American Institutes for Research (AIR) comparative study of 24 different teaching methodologies found direct instruction to be one of the very few methodologies to improve student achievement.[13] The AIR study also found that direct instruction improved students' chances for later success such as high-school graduation and college admission.[14]

When direct instruction is implemented at a school site, the result can be amazing. For example, in a survey of schools that use direct instruction, one Milwaukee school registered the highest increase in student achievement on the fourth-grade state reading exam, with 72 percent of fourth graders reading at or above the "proficient" level in 1999–00 versus 23 percent in 1997–98.[15] At another Milwaukee school, teachers who were skeptical or antagonistic to direct-instruction methods became converts once student achievement improved dramatically.[16] Such stories are commonplace where direct instruction has been well implemented.

Given this record of success, it is not surprising that many of the high-performing, high-poverty schools discussed in this report also use direct instruction.

THE INGLEWOOD MIRACLE

The Inglewood Unified School District is relatively small compared to its giant neighbor, the Los Angeles Unified School District. However, five Inglewood elementary schools make the high-performing, high-poverty list, more than in Los Angles. The natural question, then, is what is going on in Inglewood that is causing so many of its students to attain such high performance levels?

Inglewood is located next to Los Angeles International Airport. Its claim to fame is that it is the location of the Forum, the arena that served for many years as the home of the Los Angeles Lakers professional basketball team. In contrast to the multimillionaire players on the Lakers, however, Inglewood has a large population of low-income residents.

It is against this backdrop that the Inglewood Unified School District has achieved its success and why it is no exaggeration to say that there is something miraculous taking place in its schools. Following are the stories of four of these successful schools.

BENNETT-KEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

2001 API: 9
Percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: 100 percent
Student ethnic demographics: Hispanic–53 percent, African American–45 percent, Pacific Islander–2 percent
Percentage of students who are English learners: 34 percent
Percentage of teachers with emergency credentials or waivers: 20 percent

Bennett-Kew has become nationally famous, not only because of the high performance of its students, but also because of the leadership of its recently retired principal Nancy Ichinaga, a forthright woman with strong views on how children learn best. Governor Gray Davis recognized Ms. Ichinaga's talents and success by appointing her to the state Board of Education. Ms. Ichinaga's vice principal, Lorraine Fong, is now principal at Bennett-Kew and, since her appointment in July 2000, is carrying on the tradition of innovation and success.

Bennett-Kew uses the Open Court phonics-based reading curriculum, the Harcourt-Brace math curriculum, and the Saxon math curriculum as a math supplement. Prior to the recent district adoption of the Harcourt-Brace math series, Bennett-Kew primarily used the Saxon series for math instruction. Open Court and Saxon are noted for their use of scripted lessons and direct-instruction teaching methods. In the district, Bennett-Kew was a pioneer in the move to direct instruction. Initially, only Bennett-Kew and Kelso Elementary School used Open Court. Because of the tremendous success achieved by both schools, under the current district superintendent James Harris and his predecessor, all elementary schools in Inglewood are now using Open Court.

Inglewood elementary schools have been the beneficiaries of grant money from the Packard Foundation/Packard Humanities Institute. As background, philanthropist David W. Packard, through his Foundation and Institute, created the Reading Lions Project, which now assists 28 school districts. The project funds reading coaches who are teachers chosen by a district to be fully trained in the Open Court curriculum and who are sent back to the district to help their colleagues use the curriculum. A district is provided with one coach for every 30 or so teachers.

The district also receives technical and administrative support from the Sacramento-based Reading Lions Center. Districts must ensure that all teachers and principals get training from the coaches, implement regular and frequent assessment, and make the assessment results available, by classroom, to the Packard Humanities Institute. The Institute uses this classroom assessment information to track student achievement.

For Inglewood, Packard funding lasted three years and has just ended. Lorraine Fong says that Packard views modeling and coaching as keys for increased student performance. Indeed, the performance of Inglewood's elementary schools in general and Bennett-Kew in particular has garnered national attention, with Open Court and the Reading Lions Project being given much of the credit.[17]

Bennett-Kew supplements the Open Court curriculum with the computer-based Waterford early reading program. Ms. Fong notes that "Kids should have two to three thousand hours of literacy experiences and language before they come to kindergarten and this makes up for it if they don't." The Waterford program was first recommended to Bennett-Kew administrators by former state Board of Education member William J. Hume. Now all elementary schools in Inglewood use it in kindergarten.

The Waterford program was developed by the non-profit Waterford Institute. In the first year of Waterford, students master critical reading concepts including automatic letter and word recognition, phonological awareness, and understanding print concepts. In the second and third years, Waterford builds on these emergent skills with carefully sequenced balanced reading instruction by solidifying phonemic awareness, emphasizing decoding word patterns, developing comprehension strategies, practicing grammar and punctuation, promoting learning of the steps in the writing process, and extending the reading experiences to various content areas.

Students are able to attain a high level of engagement in the Waterford program without distraction because each child uses earphones and is looking at a computer screen that is displaying the instruction. Children are able to concentrate. The program can add activities to a child's record so that the child gets more instruction and practice in a particular area. The program keeps a record of how many books students have read, what activities they have completed, and how well they have done in the activities. This record can be printed out for parents.

The program also can be geared to transition non-English speakers into English fluency. Further, it allows students to create their own books. Students get books, videos, and audiocassettes to keep. The audio recording playback feature of the program allows teachers to keep a running evaluation of students' reading progress. Parents can also listen to their child's performance.

Ms. Fong says that under direct instruction methods, teachers teach to a goal. Noting what happens in too many classrooms in the state, she observes, "You go into a lot of classrooms and they're teaching, but is it teaching to what they need to be teaching?" Too often, teaching becomes aimless with too little time spent on substance and too much time spent focusing on process. Ms. Fong's predecessor, Nancy Ichinaga, said that too much instruction is about "how" not about "what": "Until you get a clear idea of what it is you have to teach, the how doesn't make any sense, it just floats away." Ms. Ichinaga pointed out that Bennett-Kew's goal-oriented teaching focuses on student achievement:

> It's not a mystery. [Bennett-Kew teachers] know exactly what it is they have to teach. They know exactly what kind of academic achievement must be expected from the kids. And so they meet these expectations.[18]

Moreover, Bennett-Kew teachers enjoy using direct-instruction methods. Success breeds enjoyment. Because the curriculum and the teaching method have resulted in high student achievement, teachers can teach at grade level instead of having to provide a lot of frustrating remedial instruction. According to Ms. Fong: "If you're a second-grade teacher you can teach the second-grade curriculum. You'll get kids that are ready to read on the second-grade level." With students who are academically prepared, teachers can reach their full potential as professionals. "If you really want to teach," says Ms. Fong, "this is the school to come to." Further, she says that teachers do have the ability to be creative, especially in subjects such as social studies, science, art, and music where teachers can plan by grade level or partner with another teacher.

Because the curriculum and the teaching method have resulted in high student achievement, teachers can teach at grade level instead of having to provide a lot of frustrating remedial instruction.

Complementing the direct-instruction curricula is the regular use of assessment. Under the Open Court and Saxon curricula, children are tested often. Such frequent use of testing irks "progressive" education theorists, like Alfie Kohn, who oppose student testing and even grades because these devices supposedly corrupt children's intrinsic motivation.[19] Ms. Fong, however, makes the common-sense argument that constant assessment is needed to monitor the progress of students. Weaknesses are detected early before they become severe problems that impede students' ability to learn. Says Ms. Fong, "You don't wait until the end of the year to say that this kid can't read." Teaching and assessment are not enemies of each other. Ms. Fong believes that "teaching and assessment have to come together."

Bennett-Kew also makes great use of the state's rigorous academic content standards. The standards are used to inform teachers as to what they need to be teaching and where their deficiencies are. Ms. Fong says:

> What we did last year with the standards, we got the English Language Arts standards by grade level and made copies for every teacher. We said that Open Court lines up pretty good. What are you teaching, when are you teaching, and what's left out? And when they checked off what they did and when they were doing it, then they were able to find out what was left off and supplement it.

In other words, rather than being something to be feared or resented, the standards provided teachers with a useful tool to improve the quality of instruction. It is also significant that Ms. Fong and her teachers at Bennett-Kew did not view the standards as being unattainable for their students. The standards, which have been rated as among the toughest and best in the nation by organizations such as the Washington, D.C.-based Fordham Foundation, were a goal and the school was confident it could meet them.

The state standards are also supported by standards-based professional development training for Bennett-Kew teachers. For the new teachers there is professional development to familiarize them with the Open Court curriculum. There is also professional development for the Waterford program.

Much has been made of the fact that California has a large number of emergency-credentialed teachers. These teachers have not gone through the regular credentialing process, which involves taking a year's worth of required courses at a university school of education. Schools with low student performance levels and high numbers of emergency-credentialed teachers often blame the latter for students' poor achievement. The presence of a high percentage of emergency-credentialed teachers, however, is not an automatic barrier to success.

Ms. Fong says that Bennett-Kew has had a great deal of success with emergency credentialed teachers.

Indeed, Ms. Fong says that Bennett-Kew has had a great deal of success with emergency-credentialed teachers. Much of the reason for this seeming anomaly is because the direct-instruction method, with its scripted lessons, makes it easier to teach. As Ms. Fong says about Bennett-Kew's articulated curriculum: "They know exactly what to teach. They know what day or what week to teach it on. It's planned out for them." Ms. Ichinaga has said:

> Because [Bennett-Kew's] curriculum is set, it's easy to instruct [new incoming teachers] on what to teach. We use curricula, the Open Court and the Saxon math, which are very scripted. So if the teachers follow the script and the pacing that both series have, then the teachers learn how to teach as they teach.[10]

In addition, Bennett-Kew provides mentoring for emergency-credentialed teachers. There is a reading coach to help them with reading instruction. They also get to watch what their more experienced colleagues are doing in class. As Ms. Fong indicates, "They've been very receptive, very open, very willing to watch other teachers."

An important advantage of using a scripted curriculum such as Open Court is that all teachers adhere to a pacing schedule that requires that lessons are set according to a strict timetable. Thus, for instance, on a given day every second-grade teacher will be teaching the same lesson. Not only does this allow the principal and other administrators to know exactly what is being taught in every classroom at all times, Ms. Fong says parents also know that every classroom is moving at the same pace. Therefore, she says, parents cannot complain that they want to move their kids into another classroom because that class is moving more rapidly.

Critics argue that scripted curricula and direct-instruction techniques do not foster higher order critical thinking, which is usually defined as the ability of students to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information in response to a problem or question that requires more than a one-right-answer response. Ms. Fong disagrees. True, basic elements are the same in every classroom. Every room has sound symbol cards, a question concept board, and seats all facing the same way. However, Ms. Fong notes that direct instruction allows for higher-level questions to be asked during classtime.

Because students have a good grasp of the basics, they are better able to think critically.

According to Ms. Fong, students read a text and "teachers ask them to clarify things, to ask questions, to sum up, to interpret, to predict, how does the text make you feel, wonder, visualize, make connections, and the kids learn to use [vocabulary] and understand what that means." Because students have a good grasp of the basics, they are better able to think critically. This is not surprising. University of Virginia education professor E.D. Hirsch, well known for his core knowledge curriculum series and his criticism of progressive education theories, has written:

> Independent-mindedness is always predicated on relevant knowledge: one cannot think critically unless one has a lot of knowledge about the issue at hand. Critical thinking is not merely giving one's opinion. To oppose "critical thinking" and "mere facts" is a profound empirical mistake. Common sense and cognitive psychology alike support the Jeffersonian view that critical thinking always depends upon factual knowledge.[21]

No wonder that Nancy Ichinaga, while still principal at Bennett-Kew, declared that "I'm a fan of E.D. Hirsch."

Ms. Fong led the authors of this paper on a tour of Bennett-Kew classes. In one first-grade classroom, students were engaging in group choral reading. Not only were students able to read the selection without mistakes, they were able to answer oral follow-up questions that tested their comprehension of the material they had just read. Such performance undercuts the criticism that students may learn reading under direct instruction, but they do not have a good understanding of what they are reading.

In the same class there were excellent examples of writing and penmanship. Under Open Court, there is a reading-writing connection text, so that as students learn the letters and sounds they also learn to write. As Ms. Fong says, "Everything is there."

In another first-grade class, students engaged in group choral spelling lessons called "dictation." Under dictation, students are given a word, they spell it, and then they go back and check it. Since direct instruction emphasizes sequential step-by-step learning, students in this class spelled "mill" and then progressed to "million." They spelled "play" and progressed to "player." All this was done with alertness and enthusiasm. It was hardly the mind-numbing nightmare scenario painted by critics who disparage "drill and kill" methods.

Indeed, the children at Bennett-Kew love to read. Because the school's curriculum and teaching methods equip them to read well, students crave opportunities to read. When the authors visited Bennett-Kew, the school had just had a book fair in conjunction with its open house and sold around $4,000 worth of books. The fact that so many books were sold to low-income children and their parents, for whom such purchases are not easy, overturns the argument of critics that direct-instruction methods destroy children's interest in reading. On the contrary, as Bennett-Kew students demonstrate, the opposite is the case.

In a third-grade class of students classified as gifted and talented, the children were reading the book *100 Dresses*. The teacher explained that in the book a girl writes a letter to her classmates who have been mean to her. Before reading her letter the teacher has the students write letters based on what they believe the girl's letter will be like. Students read their letters in front of the class. A girl named Anise and a boy Dejon read their letters and the authors of this paper were impressed by the highly articulate nature of their compositions. Not only were the letters grammatically correct, but they revealed an ability to express deeper concepts of pain, sadness, and understanding.

As opposed to the stereotype of low-income urban schools as breeding grounds for juvenile delinquency, Bennett-Kew has very few disciplinary problems. Ms. Fong says that she might suspend 20 kids a year, while a friend of hers who is a principal in neighboring district might suspend that same number in one day. Increasing student achievement instills self-respect and causes students to want to learn in the classroom. In contrast, low achievement causes frustration and classroom disruption. The empirical evidence here is telling.

With their children learning well in a safe environment, it is not surprising that parents are happy.

According to a study by the American Institutes of Research, "Direct Instruction also appears to improve students' affective behavior and social skills: self-esteem/concept, attitudes toward self and school, attribution of success or failure to self or outside, and sense of responsibility."[22] Teaching methods, therefore, have a direct impact on discipline issues. As an important supplement, though, Bennett-Kew also ensures safety for students by enforcing strong disciplinary policies. The school, for example, has a tough "no hitting" policy and a character education program.

With their children learning well in a safe environment, it is not surprising that parents are happy. Parents back up the school when there are problems. Says Ms. Fong, "They support us a lot." Parental involvement and interest is high. At open house last year, Bennett-Kew had more than 600 parents in attendance, which is eye-opening, given that the school has 865 students.

HUDNALL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

2001 API: 7
Percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: 95 percent
Student ethnic demographics: Hispanic–73 percent, African American–26 percent
Percentage of students who are English learners: 48 percent
Percentage of teachers with emergency credentials or waivers: 52 percent

Like the other Inglewood principals interviewed for this report, Hudnall principal Dr. Norma Baker shows strong leadership. Appointed principal in the 1999–00 school year, she has a clear philosophy, a no-nonsense approach, and well-reasoned views on what works and what does not when it comes to teaching children.

When asked about the role of curricula in promoting student achievement, Dr. Baker says, "The curriculum is very important." Like her fellow Inglewood principals, she immediately focused on the reading curriculum. "We chose Open Court," she observes, "because it was a systemic approach to reading and that's basically how you teach reading." She particularly liked the curriculum "because it has the phonemic awareness, it has the phonics, it has the fluency, it has the comprehension, it has the writing, it has the spelling." All those things, she says, make up a good reading program. Further, she thinks that it is very important that Open Court "is aligned very closely with the California content standards."

In math, Hudnall uses a combination of three textbook series: Anytime Math, Quest 2000, and Excel Math. Dr. Baker says that Excel is good with the basics and is especially important in the lower grades, while Anytime and Quest have a greater emphasis on conceptual understanding. She believes that combining these three gives a good balanced approach. Hudnall is also using, on a pilot basis in some K–2 classrooms, the Harcourt-Brace series that includes with each lesson the corresponding state content standard. "The key thing [about the Harcourt Brace series]," says Dr. Baker, "was that the teacher and the students knew the standard that they were being taught." In fact, implementing the state standards has been one of her chief goals as principal.

When she first came to Hudnall, Dr. Baker says, "One of the things I wanted teachers to really focus on was content standards." Her predecessor had done a very good job of establishing objectives for teachers in each grade level, and he started Hudnall's emphasis on the state's content standards. After he left Hudnall, Dr. Baker says: "What I did in my first year as a principal was to take the content standards in reading, writing, and math and make them teacher friendly. So teachers at the

beginning of the school year get a folder that has all the content standards." Describing the contents of the folder, she explains:

> The content standards are in one column and the dates are in the other column and [the teachers] have to fill in the dates that these standards were covered. That's for my edification because the other piece to this is that when they do their lesson plans they have to write the content standards that this lesson is tied to. They highlight it so that when I come in, and I go into the classroom on a weekly basis and I review lesson plans, it gives me an opportunity to observe a lot of things through an informal observation of teachers such as instructional delivery, classroom management, and adherence to curriculum. So I can get all that information just by coming in and reviewing their lesson plans as opposed to taking the lesson plans home and reading them in isolation. This works very well for me.

The standards, thus, are always informing lesson plans and play a key role in guiding and pacing instruction. In the hands of a focused, pro-active principal like Dr. Baker, the standards become a crucial tool to ensure real measurable student learning. She sums it up by saying that "Everything we have here is content/standards driven."

In order to measure student learning, assessment is required. For Dr. Baker, curriculum, standards, and assessment are tightly tied together: "[Open Court] is aligned very closely with the California content standards and that's the key. I firmly believe that students shouldn't be assessed on things they haven't been taught." Further, Open Court requires periodic assessment. She says that when she gives teachers the standards material at the beginning of the year, she indicates the standards related to the state's SAT–9 test and the ones related to the state's new "augmented" standards-aligned test.

This is important, she says, because students will be assessed on the skills covered in these tests "and if [teachers] haven't taught these skills then you are putting [students] on an uneven playing field." The result, she observes, is that: "Because the teachers are so focused on the standards and everything is centered around the standards, that has helped us. That is one of the reasons why we have done well with a curriculum that emphasizes the standards."

There are legions of critics in the education establishment who oppose frequent testing. Their main argument is that testing does not measure students' real knowledge. Dr. Baker is very familiar with claim: "I have had people arguing with me that test scores aren't everything. No they are not everything, but they are a major part of it." In her experience, tests are a good measure of student learning: "We use multiple assessments. It's a clear indicator of how well they're doing." She says that the quantitative results support what she sees in the classroom: "They are performing and they can read anything."

"I have had people arguing with me that test scores aren't everything. No they are not everything, but they are a major part of it."

Furthermore, assessment allows for the pinpointing of student weaknesses. Dr. Baker reviews all the periodic assessment results for reading and math at her school. She uses the results as diagnostic tools: "We use them as interventions. When I look at a report the first six weeks and I see that a child is not reaching benchmark, I'm not too alarmed, but when I look at the 12th week and there's no growth, there's great concern."

Based on the assessment results, students are grouped into one of four categories: intensive, strategic, benchmark, and challenge. Different intervention strategies are used for each group. For example, she says that the strategic group is just below benchmark and just needs a little more help, while the intensive group needs much more assistance. The goal is to get all students at least up to the benchmark level.

Students who are not achieving are directed to various programs such as intensive reading or the retention program after school. Low-performing children are also directed into the computer lab for standards-based programs.

In addition, Dr. Baker says that Hudnall has an afterschool program: "We take those students that are in the 25th percentile and whose parents are participants in the CalWorks [welfare-to-work] program and they attend the afterschool enrichment program." In the afterschool program, besides enrichment concepts, participating students have a day of math and a day of reading. Echoing the old adage that practice makes perfect, Dr. Baker says: "They are getting overkill in their area of need. Hopefully, they will be successful."

The program also includes time for homework so there is someone, usually a teacher, there to assist students. There is very high participation of teachers in the afterschool program. According to Dr. Baker: "The majority of our teachers here participate in afterschool tutoring. In fact, I would say 95 percent of them, but they tutor their own students after school and it becomes more or less an extended work day on two days a week."

Using the assessment results and the group categories, Dr. Baker says that the focus is on skill development. If a child has a problem in comprehension, for example, then the school's best comprehension teacher will work with that child and others with similar problems. The school will work with the children for as long as it takes until they have mastered the skill. Says Dr. Baker: "Whatever the situation is, we will address it. That's how we are going to fill more of these gaps so that none of these children fall through the cracks. It's not an option."

Critics of testing also usually claim that California's content standards are too difficult and set the bar too high. They argue that it is not realistic to expect the state's students, especially low-income minority students, to meet the standards. Dr. Baker strongly disputes this view, saying:

"...if you set high expectations for children and communicate that to them, then they in turn will work hard to meet those expectations."

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> But it's all about expectations. That's the other thing. The key to success is expectations as well. Because if you set high expectations for children and communicate that to them, then they in turn will work hard to meet those expectations. You have to come with that kind of mindset. We have a favorite saying around here, "in this school you're either a reader or non-reader." It has nothing to do with your socioeconomic level; it has nothing to do with your ethnicity or any of these things. When you come in here you are either a reader or non-reader and our job is to make you a reader. That's the bottom line.

Yet, many top education officials continue to use the excuse that socioeconomic status determines student achievement. José Huizar, vice president of the Los Angeles school board, uses the tired excuse that "Standardized tests do not necessarily measure what our kids are learning in the classroom but [reflect] socioeconomic status and resources in the schools."[23] Mr. Huizar blames low student test scores on the supposed fact that "A majority of our kids don't have the life experience that these tests are testing."[24]

Dr. Baker, however, knows from first-hand experience about the potential consequences of having low expectations for children from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds. Referring to her own family background, she says:

> It has nothing to do with socioeconomics or background and all these other things that people are saying. I can speak to that. If they were giving away free lunches when I was growing up I would have fallen into that category. If someone had taken the attitude that because I was poor I could not learn, I wouldn't be where I am today. So it has nothing to do with the background of the children.

Because of her background, when she sees students achieving below her expectations, Dr. Baker is not afraid to push them to perform better, even if others think that her students are performing well enough:

> We just set our expectation and each year we continue to raise the bar. Our students write well but they don't write well enough for me. People come in and visit our school and say, "Oh, this is great writing." But that's their expectation; for me it's not good enough so we are now raising the bar even higher.

To ensure that the bar is set higher, she says, "We are going to do staff development so that [teachers] understand clearly what my vision is and what my expectations are."

Staff development, like other aspects of life at Hudnall, is very goal oriented. Every year, Dr. Baker and her teachers establish concrete objectives. Her top goal at the time of the interview was to improve students' writing. In order to meet this, staff development focused on how best to teach writing. Once teachers are prepared, then proper instruction can take place. Says Dr. Baker, "what we are going to do is take part of the writing component in Open Court and each grade level is going to select a topic."

After selecting a topic, writing assignments based on grade-level expectations will be used. In kindergarten, students will describe their observations. In first grade, students will write about observations, then later in the year they will write a story, and then the third writing piece will be a report of information. Each grade level will receive in print exactly what the writing expectations are. All these details will be covered in staff development. After each writing assignment, one of Dr. Baker's grade level meetings with teachers will focus on grading, using the school's evaluation rubrics.

The result is that teachers know what they need to concentrate on and what they need to do in order to improve their teaching and the performance of their students. In response to the observation that much of the professional development at Hudnall seems connected to the curriculum, Dr. Baker responded, "Yes, totally." Specifically, she says, "Most of it is subject-matter based."

In response to a question about teacher-centered versus student-centered teaching methods, Dr. Baker said that "All the programs [used at Hudnall] are teacher-directed curricula." Why so? "Students need structure first of all," she says, and if a student is supposed to learn something "and the major input is from the student, how does a student determine what his or her needs are?"

Under student-centered methods, Dr. Baker says that teachers may have some input, but different teachers will have different inputs with the result that "you get this hodgepodge of instruction" with teachers "not on the same page in terms of instruction." Teacher-centered methods are better for a variety of reasons. First, she says that "it works" and research has shown that these methods are effective. Also, she states: "I'm a strong advocate of teacher-directed instruction because for students it gives a better idea of where they should be academically. It helps define the standards for the students, for all students."

"I'm a strong advocate of teacher-directed instruction because for students it gives a better idea of where they should be academically. It helps define the standards for the students, for all students."

Further, she says that under teacher-centered direct instruction, Hudnall's students are comprehending what they are learning. Countering the misconception that direct- instruction techniques are nothing more than "drill and kill," Dr. Baker says that what Hudnall does "goes deeper than drill and kill." As an example, she noted:

> I sat in a class, a first grade class, and they were talking about precipitation. And they knew what precipitation was and they could describe it to me. You can't just say that Open Court is drill and kill in a situation like that. They were talking about the weather and different stories about the weather so they obviously have a good clear understanding of the vocabulary.

Finally, Dr. Baker says that direct instruction ensures that all teachers are operating off the same page: "Every third grade teacher knows what they're going to be teaching. If Johnny moves from this class to the next class, the delivery may be different but the curriculum is going to be the same."

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Parents have embraced Hudnall's philosophy, methods, and policies. Dr. Baker says: "I have great parents here who are very supportive of the academic rigor we set. We have high standards and they love it." If a student is not performing well, parents support the school's response. Dr. Baker notes: "[Parents] will be more than happy to have their child stay after school for tutoring. We don't have a problem in that respect."

High student achievement has resulted in few discipline problems. According to Dr. Baker, "We don't have discipline problems of the magnitude that other schools have." The school holds a character education assembly at the beginning of every month. Responsibility, respect, and other character traits are discussed.

KELSO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

2001 API: 9
Percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: 91 percent
Student ethnic demographics: Hispanic–60 percent, African American–38 percent
Percentage of students who are English learners: 43 percent
Percentage of teachers with emergency credentials or waivers: 40 percent

Mrs. Jane Moore, the focused, articulate, and energetic principal of Kelso Elementary School, has been one of Inglewood's pioneering innovators. A firm believer in the Open Court reading curriculum, in 1998 she met with Nancy Ichinaga, Alice Furry of the Reading Lions Project, and David Packard to discuss Open Court. Inglewood had decided to adopt Open Court as its reading program. Packard agreed to assist the district with the implementation of Open Court. And Mrs. Moore wrote a plan detailing how to train all teachers in the district in Open Court.

With the support of the then superintendent, the district paid for substitutes for the regular teachers who were in training. The district also paid for a double classroom trailer that was to serve as the site of the training. The district's view was that if it was going to go with Open Court, then the teachers had to be trained properly. An Open Court trainer from the program's publisher, SRA/McGraw Hill, who used to be a first-grade teacher at Bennett-Kew (and who taught Mrs. Moore's son), was brought in. The trainer came to the district one week a month and a schedule was developed so that kindergarten teachers were trained on Monday, first-grade teachers on Tuesday, and so on. The minimum requirement was that teachers had to attend three training sessions, but they could also attend more. The training was available throughout the year.

Mrs. Moore then went to each school where there were trained teachers to make sure that the school had the needed materials and that everyone was comfortable with the program. The next step was to identify teachers who were ready to become coaches, who were to act like mentors, for Open Court reading. Initially they were part-time, working only after school with other teachers because they still had their regular classroom duties. After the first year, the Packard Foundation provided additional funding so that these teacher-coaches could become full-time coaches.

The coaches could then take responsibility for ordering and dispersing materials, writing pacing schedules, monitoring every K–3 classroom, and conducting sample lessons (they would take the class while the regular teacher would watch and observe). The coaches also went to Sacramento for one week to receive training by Packard-funded experts. Mrs. Moore was going to Sacramento every month for training and special meetings for Open Court coordinators. She met once a week with the coaches to discuss what had been accomplished and what still remained to be done.

In the end, she says: "Within a year or two, we were able to train every single teacher in this district in the elementary schools on the proper way to teach reading. And this was never done before." She also set up administrator training because administrators didn't realize how involved Open Court is, the importance of the materials, all components and pacing, and how important it is that teachers stay on target and never prolong the lesson.

All this training, she says, contributed to the overall success of the district. She believes that the key is to keep everybody focused and on target. Everyone's goal had to be making the reading curriculum work:

> You had a group of teachers, coaches in the district, whose sole purpose was to make sure that the language arts piece was intact in their schools. I really feel that it's extremely important for a district. You are constantly getting new teachers every year, there's going to be turnover, due to attrition or people leaving, whatever, so you need to have that focus. We think, at least I do and I think most of the teachers here at Kelso do too, that language arts/reading is the most important thing in an elementary school. There is nothing else more important than that. Everything is based on that. Even mathematics is based on that. We teach reading all day. When we pick up the social studies, we're teaching reading.

Mrs. Moore likes Open Court for many reasons. For instance, she says that: "The wonderful thing about Open Court is that there's a commonality across the grade levels. You don't have to worry about a lot of variance based on the teacher's opinion or personality." Open Court gives her important assurances: "[Teachers] are expected to cover lessons; if you tell me you're on lesson 25, I know that I can go in and expect to see certain things taking place in every single classroom at that grade level." Within this structured framework, however, she emphasizes that teachers can still be creative: "I've seen some extremely creative lessons from teachers but they were true to Open Court in the presentation of the lesson."

"We think, at least I do and I think most of the teachers here at Kelso do too, that language arts/reading is the most important thing in an elementary school."

Using a scripted program like Open Court does not necessarily make it easy for teachers. Mrs. Moore says that: "The first year with Open Court is difficult, it's rough because you have to stay on target." Even veteran teachers, she observes, keep referring back to the Open Court teacher's guide. That is not a negative, she says, "that's quality assurance."

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Mrs. Moore also likes the fact that when a teacher is sick, Open Court's scripted lesson plans allow subs or administrators to take over. She says that she doesn't want to have wasted days.

There is a misconception that direct-instruction programs like Open Court emphasize basic mechanics at the expense of broader comprehension. Mrs. Moore disputes this view. Yes, Open Court builds a foundation of basic skills. It is upon that foundation, she notes, that comprehension is based:

> In third grade we teach students to adjust their reading rate based on what they're reading. In the first and second grade they'll be reading fast and getting the words correct. In the third grade, they'll be getting more technical information so the teachers have to teach them that this is a different kind of article, a different genre. You're going to change and you're going to take notes, you're going to slow down for comprehension.

Comprehension, however, is not something that children discover on their own, but rather, she says: "That is something that is taught. It's supposed to be taught explicitly." Explicitly teaching comprehension is made easier due to the fact that by the time the children get to the third grade they have the basic reading skills: "The [third-grade] teacher doesn't have to teach beginning reading. They can now get into science and social studies, the higher order thinking."

This is not to say that children in grades K–2 are not receiving comprehension skills. Mrs. Moore says that they are:

> You can go into a second grade room and hear a child say, "I can connect this to something else or I can visualize," actually using those words. They're using the terms they've been taught. They understand what it means to make a connection with an outside experience or something they saw on television or in another book. It's just phenomenal.

According to Mrs. Moore, Open Court has not only taught her students to read, it has sparked a love of reading. In response to the stereotype that students using Open Court do not read for pleasure, she says, "Not so." She has ensured that the library "is just flooded with new books and old books," classrooms are filled with books, and that the school purchases all suggested readings listed under each Open Court unit. And Kelso students have eagerly taken advantage of these library resources.

Besides using Open Court for reading, Kelso has used the Silver Burdett math series for several years. Now the district has adopted the Harcourt Brace series. She considers the Silver Burdett and Harcourt Brace math series to be similar. Kelso has also used the Excel series as a supplement. Recently, Mrs. Moore introduced the direct-instruction Saxon math series. The reason she introduced Saxon was because she found that in the first grade the students weren't getting to certain tested skills in a timely manner. Her praise for Saxon is high:

> I just absolutely think that Saxon is fabulous. I think that Saxon is wonderful.... I have seen third graders counting forwards, backwards, you can start with the number 50 and say give me all the even or odd numbers.... They can manipulate numbers so well.... Temperature,

> number lines, multiplication, addition, and subtraction. They're doing algebra, [although] they don't know it. It's all happening. They're looking at things a little differently with Saxon. I also like the fact it is teacher friendly, it's scripted. I can guarantee that all my third graders are going to be taught the same thing because the script is the same.

She also likes the basics-oriented Excel series: "Excel is excellent. Excel reminds you a little bit of Saxon because you get all the skill covered in a sequential manner but you get exposure from day one, too – geometry, fractions, whatever – as opposed to most basals where you wait until the end of the year until you get a whole chapter on fractions."

Mrs. Moore firmly believes in the effectiveness of teacher-centered direct-instruction methods and hopes that teachers who have been instructed in other approaches will keep an open mind: "I just interviewed a teacher yesterday, a young teacher who majored in political science, and I was telling her that the most important thing to me is that you come with an open mind and you are flexible, you come with a good transcript, a real strong work ethic, and you are willing to be taught." She says, "I can train a teacher if they are intelligent and willing to learn." On the other hand, she says: "If they come with a lot of baggage and preconceived ideas, it's more difficult. It's not impossible, but it's more difficult."

Mrs. Moore, like her other Inglewood colleagues, is a big believer in testing. She says that "the assessments are so important" and the school tests frequently. She uses the test results as a diagnostic tool to discover student weaknesses, such as reading difficulties: "I require the teachers to turn in the [Open Court assessment] results to me and then I go through and we highlight and look at who is not making it. This is the basis for the discussion with the teacher." She notes that:

> My job is to say "what can we do, what's not happening?" I'm not blaming the teacher, but I want to know what we can do to facilitate this child's learning. If it's a second language issue, I need to know that. If the child is struggling because they have a speech problem, frequent ear infection, or high absences, then we need to know so we can start keeping an eye on that.

"Everything," she says, "should be based on the results."

Kelso has created its own tests to assess key skills. For example, Mrs. Moore says: "We have our own little test for beginning, middle, and ending sounds. Manipulation of sounds is extremely critical." The importance of the assessment, however, is tied back to teacher-centered instruction: "Being able to hear and have a critical ear is important, which requires that the child to be focused and attend to the teacher, which then demands that the teacher be central and the most important thing happening in that classroom."

"My job is to say 'what can we do, what's not happening?' I'm not blaming the teacher, but I want to know what we can do to facilitate this child's learning."

Mrs. Moore made it clear that she doesn't like to waste time in the classroom. Wasted time hurts the children. Instruction is her focus: "We spend every minute in instruction. Other schools have more assemblies perhaps in the morning, but we eliminated a lot of that because we want them to get right to the room." At Kelso when students step into the classroom, "Most of the teachers have work either on the board or on the desk, so the children are ready to go." She personally monitors classroom activities to ensure that everyone stays focused on what they should be doing:

> When I go in to monitor instruction, I'm looking for how many students are on task and how long it takes the teacher to transition from one activity to another. Part of the training I do with teachers is getting them to a point when you say, "Take out your scorer's notebook," you can literally count the seconds and everybody is with you and ready to go. Little things like that we try to teach teachers so they don't have this wasted time.

Mrs. Moore, however, is not some martinet with a stopwatch. Rather, she is truly compassionate in caring that every child is able to learn. That is why when she visits classes she works personally with children who are having problems. She says that she really enjoys helping students.

Like so much at Kelso, staff development focuses on curricula. For example, Mrs. Moore says that recently she had teachers put together grade-level curriculum notebooks that contained the standards, a parent guide to what every child should know at that grade level for various subjects, an outline of how Open Court works, copies of the assessments, and other key documents.

Parental involvement is encouraged. Kelso has afterschool activities for parents, such as language programs. Such programs are important given the large number of parents who are immigrants. Mrs. Moore also says:

> We have pretty much an open policy in terms of visiting the classrooms. We tell parents that if they'd like to come in, they don't have to make an appointment. They can come in, sit, and observe. We ask the parents not to interrupt the teacher during instruction. If they want, they may talk to the teacher from 7:30 to 8:00AM, during recess time, after school, or at a conference.

In addition, she notes: "We have parent meetings, five a year, in the cafeteria. It's usually standing room only, lots and lots of parents."

Mrs. Moore realizes that there are kids with problems at home. The goal of the school, however, cannot be to solve all the problems students face. Rather, the goal of the school should be "equip them with something that they can use to overcome the problems they are facing in life."

Kelso has very few discipline problems during instructional time. Mrs. Moore tells K–2 teachers: "If you're having a problem, don't send the child to me, I'd rather come to the classroom. I'd rather go there and sit next to the child, or talk to him or her outside the room for a few minutes and put them right back in." Mrs. Moore and her assistant principal handle all discipline problems, thus taking the burden off teachers. Even so, she says, "I haven't had any severe problems." Kelso also requires kids to wear uniforms.

When asked about any other factors that have helped her school succeed, Mrs. Moore mentioned that Kelso offers children instruction during vacation time. There are instructional aides, retired teachers, and off-track teachers who come in during vacation to ensure that students' skills don't lag. Also, she pointed out that many teachers extend the day so that kids have more time in school. Finally, the school has a policy of homework five nights a week.

PAYNE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

2001 API: 7

Percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: 100 percent

Student ethnic demographics: Hispanic–93 percent, African American–6 percent

Percentage of students who are English learners: 67 percent

Percentage of teachers with emergency credentials or waivers: 44 percent

Mrs. Debbie Tate is the principal of Payne Elementary School. Like her colleagues, she attributes much of the success of Inglewood schools to the Open Court reading curriculum: "It's a really good program. I think that has contributed a lot to our school district and our scores going up." Also, "the big jump in improvement in Inglewood schools is because of the consistency with the language arts program." She especially thinks having an Open Court reading coach at each school "made a big difference" since "it's like they had a mentor on site as far as implementing the program."

Mrs. Tate notes that "I know that L.A. is just starting it and three or four years from now they'll probably see the same result." Indeed, after switching to Open Court, first-grade SAT–9 reading scores in the Los Angeles Unified School District have improved 14 percentile points, from the 42nd percentile in 2000 to the 56th percentile in 2001. First-grade spelling scores rose by 18 points from the 38th percentile in 2000 to the 56th percentile in 2001. Both Hispanic and African-American first-graders showed significant improvement. Los Angeles superintendent Roy Romer testified before a state commission that Open Court, not the state's much ballyhooed class-size reduction program, was responsible for the gains.[25]

In his testimony, Romer also noted that initially there was great resistance from teachers in his district. After the test results came back, however, the opposition died down. Mrs. Tate observes: "Often in the beginning it's hard to adjust to change and you're going to have those who are going to resist it. 'I don't want to do this and I want to do my own thing in the classroom.'" However, she says that after awhile the success of the program makes believers out of people.

Hand in hand with the reading curriculum is the pacing schedule which tells where each teacher must be on a certain day regarding their lessons. Mrs. Tate says that the reading coach goes around and checks the pacing schedule and teachers' adherence to the schedule. There are weekly and monthly assessments which the coach oversees, reporting back to the principal. She says that "It's a pretty consistent sound-based program." In contrast, she observes that "I think that in some other dis-

tricts and schools you have classrooms where everybody does their own thing as far as language arts or any subject area is concerned, but with this program it keeps everyone focused in the same direction."

For math instruction, Mrs. Tate says: "We use Saxon math, but this year the district has just adopted Harcourt Brace, which is what we'll be using next year." Although the district has adopted Harcourt Brace, she says: "We've used Saxon for the last two or three years and it's good." Furthermore: "Our teachers think very highly of Saxon math. It's teacher friendly." She says that Saxon is a good structured program similar to Open Court in its pacing and weekly and monthly assessments.

Mrs. Tate also credits the state academic content standards for contributing to the district's success: "And then also I think that the district has really made a big turnaround with the California state standards, making sure that everybody is using them in their implementation of instruction." She has ensured that the standards guide instruction at Payne:

> One thing I did this year was to collect lesson plans [from the teachers] and keep them on file every week. And in the lesson plans they are required to indicate what standards were addressed during that particular lesson. This makes teachers very aware of the standards. We have also had staff development in regards to implementing state standards. Once you give the teachers their focus and goals, it makes a big difference.

The argument that the standards are too tough for students like those at Payne does not impress Mrs. Tate: "I don't set limitations, I really don't. I don't say that anything is impossible." She believes that there are ways for all students to meet the standards: "They may be rigorous standards but then there's a way of breaking them down so they can be understood, especially by the English language learner." This is important given that two-thirds of the students at Payne have limited proficiency in English.

"I think that in some other districts and schools you have classrooms where everybody does their own thing as far as language arts or any subject area is concerned, but with this program it keeps everyone focused in the same direction."

Given her enthusiasm for direction-instruction curricula, it is not surprising to hear what Mrs. Tate says about teaching methods: "It has to be teacher directed." It is very important, she says, "to stay on task, especially with the programs we have which are on pacing schedules." "You can't fall behind," she warns, and "You can't get off track." She agrees with her colleagues in Inglewood that student-centered methods can get teachers off track.

Mrs. Tate is an assessment advocate and uses assessment results as diagnostic tools. The classes are heterogeneous, that is, there are no classes specifically for high or low achievers. Each class will have high-, medium-, and low-performing pupils. Payne has a school data team that meets once a

month to analyze student assessment scores. Also, teachers and the principal have copies of the various assessment results.

At the beginning of the year the principal and each teacher go over scores to see where there needs to be improvement. The test scores indicate which students are performing poorly in reading comprehension, spelling, or some other skill. In response, the lowest performing students in each classroom are assigned to an afterschool program. Says Mrs. Tate: "You have to know what you're working with. How can you solve a problem if you don't know what the problem is?" She goes on to say:

> If you walk into the classroom, you should be able to ask how this child is doing. Is this child on grade level or is this child not on grade level? Does this child have a behavior problem? Does he have an attention problem? It's very important that you know that. If you don't know that, you don't know what to do.

Without assessment, she points out, you will not know "that Johnny needs help with spelling" or "that Johnny is not decoding right." "Those things," she says, "you really have to know." And in order to know these things, "You have to use data."

Teacher collaboration is an important activity at Payne. Mrs. Tate says that Payne has monthly grade-level meetings for teachers. A new teacher coming into the school, therefore, has a lot support from that grade-level representative on staff and the other teachers. Mrs. Tate observes that the teachers share with each other to find out what is working and what is not.

"I believe a school cannot operate if it's not disciplined. At Payne school, the principal is not the only one who disciplines."

In addition to grade-level meetings, there is a weekly staff meeting. Also, Mrs. Tate says, "Every year the district has three buy-back days which are staff development days." On those buy-back days the focus is on curricula, daily operations, instruction, and discipline.

Regarding discipline and safety issues, Mrs. Tate says that she will not allow a disruptive child to interfere with the learning process: "That's one thing I don't tolerate and I let all the teachers know that you're not going to let one kid take the learning away from 32." To get this message across, she enforces tough discipline policies:

> I'm a strong believer in discipline. I believe a school cannot operate if it's not disciplined. At Payne school, the principal is not the only one who disciplines. Regardless of whether you are in the classroom or not, or are the principal, a teacher, or a staff person on this campus, if you see a kid doing something that he's not supposed to be doing, you correct him. We do that here. We also have classroom discipline plans, which all staff members have copies of, as to what happens if a child misbehaves in a classroom. We have a warning and a four-step process, which is followed, and they truly implement that.

Misbehavior by students can also result in a pink slip being sent home to the parents. A child who gets too many pink slips gets detention. Again, any staff member, not just the principal or a teacher, can give a pink slip. Payne has student study teams, which involve meetings among administrators, teachers, and parents to find out why a child is misbehaving. Mrs. Tate says that the children know that discipline is predictable and will be enforced.

The discipline policies are laid out for children at discipline assemblies held at the beginning of the school year. The happy result of school's tough approach, says Mrs. Tate, is that "We really don't have a discipline problem at Payne." In response, parents are pleased and are very supportive of the school's disciplinary procedures.

Some education theorists, notably Alfie Kohn, oppose rewarding children for good behavior. Even the use of praise is frowned upon. These theorists claim that using rewards somehow corrupts students' pure intrinsic motivations. Mrs. Tate takes the opposite view:

> We have student incentives, lots of student incentives as far as attendance; with good behavior, we have panda dollars which are little dollars we give the kids when they do well. They collect so many and we have a prize box. We have an assembly every Monday morning and we pick winners out of the box. We have pizza parties and popcorn parties. We have cafeteria cards to reward the best behavior at lunch time and we have an ice cream party at the end of the month. So we have many incentives.

Given that all humans respond to incentives and disincentives, Mrs. Tate's policies make much more sense in the real world than the ivory tower musings of "progressive" theorists.

Mrs. Tate encourages parental involvement. Payne has a variety of programs for parents, including language programs. The latter are especially important given the high number of immigrant families who have children at the school.

SCHOOLS IN OTHER DISTRICTS

The four remaining schools profiled in this report are located in the Los Angeles Unified School District and Imperial County's El Centro Elementary School District.

ROBERT HILL LANE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

2001 API: 7
Percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: 89 percent
Student ethnic demographics: Hispanic–95 percent, Asian American–3 percent, African American–1 percent
Percentage of students who are English learners: 36 percent
Percentage of teachers with emergency credentials or waivers: 23 percent

Robert Hill Lane Elementary School is one of the few high-poverty schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District that is also high achieving. It sits across the street from East Los Angeles Community College and is adorned with murals of the late labor leader César Chavez. The school's principal is Sue Wong, a friendly woman who answered the interview questions with the kind of certainty that comes from witnessing what really works in the classroom.

Ms. Wong says that "Curriculum does help when it is aligned to the standards." The school has been using Open Court for the last four years. Ms. Wong notes that "We started with Open Court even before it became a district mandate." Prior to the adoption of Open Court, the school had used the literature-based Silver Burdett reading series, which did not emphasize phonics like Open Court.

During that time, Ms. Wong observed that "our first graders were not been reading as well as we had hoped." The test scores were abysmal, and she says her reaction was: "Oh my gosh, my kids cannot read." Indeed, she admitted that "because we were really into whole language, the kids could not read, they could not spell, they could not sound out a single word." Whole language reading instruction de-emphasizes letter-sound relationships in favor of student recognition of whole words.

As a consequence, according to Ms. Wong, "We were looking for a strong phonics-based program and so we narrowed it down to two and we decided to go with Open Court just for the phonics part and keeping our base program, which was Silver Burdett." However, trying to mix the two programs was, she says, "horrendous." Eventually, the school shifted completely to the Open Court program, with grades three to five

"...because we were really into whole language, the kids could not read, they could not spell, they could not sound out a single word."

going to Open Court last year. Of switching to Open Court, she says, "we found it to be very successful." She cites several indicators: "We saw growth, we saw improvement, we saw more commitment." With their newly acquired reading skills, she found that the students could really excel: "By the time we got [K–1] students reading fluently, they could read any [literature] series."

Ms. Wong makes sure that she monitors Open Court implementation personally: "I try to get into the classrooms every day and monitor the instructional program as far as Open Court is concerned. I will stay and sit for a two-hour block to see the whole transformation of the lesson." She cast an eagle eye on every aspect of the teaching: "I will take in with me my Open Court manual and see that this is done and that is done. Then I will give input as far as what is happening."

In the switchover to Open Court, the teachers at Lane were initially resistant. They knew there was a need, but they didn't know whether Open Court would work. In addition, says Ms. Wong, "They were very resistant to the structure of the Open Court program, the time element that is involved, the pacing of the lessons (which is one lesson a day), and not quite sure of the results." However, she notes: "Once they saw the results, felt good about them, and knew their kids were reading, then we got more of a buy in and resistance dropped." Indeed, one second-grade teacher with years of experience in teaching reading said that she always thought she knew how to teach reading until Open Court showed there was a better way.

Ms. Wong also discovered that there was an obvious dichotomy of results based on whether a teacher truly implemented the program: "And you could tell the teachers that were implementing the program because you could look at the results, and the teachers that weren't implementing the program were equally clear." In Open Court, she observes: "You really need to follow the script and to do the modeling because sometimes teachers will read the teachers' manual and will sidestep things. Before you know it, they will not have covered a piece."

Although Lane has had success with Open Court, there have been difficulties besides the hesitancy of teachers. For instance, Ms. Wong says the students are not having any problem now with decoding, but the challenge is to get them to comprehend the vocabulary, especially in the upper grades. In Open Court, the vocabulary is sophisticated and she says that the students at Lane do not come with a lot of experiences that allow them to be familiar with the vocabulary. Teachers, therefore, have to spend a lot of time working on vocabulary development. She says that it is a balancing act to give enough time to vocabulary development and to comprehension skills because without vocabulary understanding you cannot have comprehension. On the other hand one cannot spend all one's time on vocabulary.

Keeping to the pacing schedule is also a challenge. Ms. Wong notes: "We see the time element is an issue and it's still a struggle for my teachers because we spend a lot of time on the units and we do monitor them with the six and eight week assessments."

Still, the benefits far outweigh the downsides. Ms. Wong points out that under Open Court: "I have first graders now that are writing more than ever. I'm very proud of the results because my ultimate goal is to get them to be good writers and good communicators." Also, she says: "In kindergarten

class, kids are writing sentences that are intelligible and comprehensible. They're using the skills, they're employing them, and they're confident. So they're much more prepared as they move along."

The children, she finds, realize that they now have better skills and are happy about it: "The kids seem very enthusiastic. They're much more confident." She finds this enthusiasm in her walks around campus: "I walk in during independent work time and they are reading. They are proud of their ability." Indeed, so many children will ask Ms. Wong if she wants to hear them read that it's often hard for her to get out of the classroom. Parents, she says, cannot believe how well their children are performing: "Parents are really amazed at how well they can read. You try to explain to the parents that the standards are different, the expectations are higher, and the curriculum is different now and they say, 'wow, the kids are reading' and they can't get over it."

Lane uses the Harcourt Brace math series supplemented by Houghton Miflin's *Math Steps*. Teachers meet as grade-level teams to work out their difficulties in implementing the curriculum. In math, they found that before Harcourt Brace a lot of their materials were not aligned to the standards. The Harcourt Brace series has the advantage of including the state standards in the texts to show how lessons align with the standards.

Ms. Wong is a believer in teacher-centered instruction: "I have been in many schools and I see that an effective school is when you walk into a classroom at any time, any day, and you see teachers teaching." Of her school, which used to have a more student-centered approach, she says: "We've come through a transformation. The fun cutesy things, you don't see those."

The state standards, says Ms. Wong, are the key guideposts for instruction at Lane: "We have used the frameworks and content standards to identify all the grade level standards, and when and where are they taught in the text." Standards charts are posted in classrooms so students can understand them. Standards for the week are highlighted so children know what they must learn. For instance, students may have to write a long narrative piece based on a prompt that is standards-based. Standards-aligned subject matter knowledge for the children is also the focus of professional development for Lane's teachers.

Standards charts are posted in classrooms so students can understand them. Standards for the week are highlighted so children know what they must learn.

Ms. Wong believes that the standards are attainable for her students because children rise to the level of expectations: "You get what you expect. The classrooms and the teachers that do well are those that have high expectations. We see kids attain them." When evaluating the work of students, she says that teachers will say: "You know what, our kids have come a long way. That's their observation." Lane is not the perfect standards-based school, but she says it is making good progress.

Lane uses assessment as an important improvement tool for students and teachers. The grade-level teams devised a pacing plan on what teachers need to teach given that the state SAT-9 test

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comes in May. Every year the pacing plan is revisited to see if it needs revision and whether there are shortcomings. Ms. Wong says:

> We use our data from our SAT–9 every year to see how well we did. We do a personal grade-level analysis. We do a school-wide analysis. Teachers do an individual analysis of how well they did. So then they can see if there is improvement, what kind of change did they effect, were they successful.

During the teacher personal analyses, the teachers compare test scores from year to year. They are looking at how much value has been added as a result of their instruction. Teachers choose an area of focus, for example, comprehension, and they then look to see if there was growth and if they made a positive contribution. If the results were not there, says Ms. Wong, then decisions are made as to what has to be done to improve things. Staff development is targeted to those areas where there are weaknesses in student performance. District level assessments are also analyzed by grade level to see how well students are doing in writing. The results are examined to discover areas on which teachers need to concentrate. Again, this gives them focus for staff development.

Teachers not only teach the regular day, but they also support the instructional program with a lot of intervention. Teachers offer afterschool tutoring for students twice a week plus on Saturdays. These are instructional sessions, not homework tutoring. The sessions are targeted to students who need the help. Volunteers from the college across the street come in to help with homework tutoring.

Finding the right person to teach at Lane is not easy. Ms. Wong says she takes a long time to hire: "You have to see if this person believes in your philosophy and where is this person coming from. It needs to be a match." If the person does not have the same belief system, then there are going to be problems. One thing that is not a factor in whether a person has what it takes to teach at Lane is a regular teaching credential. Ms. Wong has five emergency credentialed teachers on staff "and they are very strong." She says, "They come with a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of energy and want to be here. They are very focused on how well they perform their jobs." In contrast, she has found, "I have people that have completed a credential that may not be as strong as when you interviewed them, and they don't seem to have the skills."

Once teachers are hired, she says that the credential is not terribly important in determining performance. Instead, performance comes from teachers' receptiveness to recommendations, suggestions, and how open they are to working on self-improvements. She observes, "I find you can hire a probationary teacher who has gone through the [credentialing] process and is just not willing to take on suggestions, be flexible, or work on some of the issues they should." Rather than paper credentials, the keys to good teaching include a desire to be at Lane, a strong idea of professional purpose, and a strong knowledge base.

Parents are highly involved in activities at Lane. Says Ms. Wong, the involvement by parents stretches from helping their own children with academics to school events:

> Parental involvement is really key. We see that kids who are successful have very active parents and they support us with literacy at home. They're reading to the kids, monitoring that 20 to 30 minute reading period a day. Our parents are very involved in activities such as mini-Olympics, they're here for Cinco de Mayo.

She is pleased that the twice-a-year parent conferences at Lane have more than a 95-percent attendance rate. She credits teachers because they have a strong rapport with parents. Also, grade-level parent training classes are conducted on Saturdays and during the week in which parents are taught the techniques of Open Court, such as how to blend a word and how to use the sound-letter cards. These classes are important because they give parents the ability to reinforce what is being taught at school.

Lane is a school-based management school. Thus, there is a school site council, a compensatory education council, an English language learner advisory council, plus a local school leadership council. Regardless of the forum, however, Ms. Wong emphasizes that the common vision is to ask how an issue impacts student achievement. "As an instructional leader," she says she must "keep the conversation focused on instruction all the time because you can lose sight of it by focusing all your time and energies on governance issues."

There are few discipline problems at Lane. Ms. Wong says she has minimal referrals. She observes that children's self-esteem is tied to their ability to achieve: "Kids don't have self-esteem if they know they can't read." She also says that "They feel good about what they can do and they're more enthusiastic about learning."

Ms. Wong says that her biggest challenge is obtaining necessary resources. She cites the cruel irony that if the school succeeds it is punished financially: "Being a high achieving school, you tend to be neglected. You see awards money going out to low performing schools while here we are struggling to make ends meet. We're doing well, but you can see if I had a few more dollars I could really take this school and make it shine." Her goal is always to make sure that teachers have everything they need to do their job, including necessary materials and tools.

She does not like the strings attached to the earmarked money that comes down from the state: "They should open the pot up so that you can spend the money where you see fit." She favors no restrictions except for low-performing schools and would strongly favor earmarked categorical funds to be block granted. Another downside of categorical funding is the mountain of paperwork needed to show compliance with state rules. She says: "If you were to take away some of the paperwork in compliance we would have more time as administrators and instructional leaders in the classrooms to deal with those issues that will affect change and learning." Pointing behind her desk, she said with exasperation, "Look at the boxes behind me, the paperwork is

"Kids don't have self-esteem if they know they can't read."

horrendous." She made a plea to policymakers: "The paperwork really needs to be reduced so the focus can be redirected."

Finally, Ms. Wong pays tribute to her teachers. It is they, she says, who are the big reason why students are doing so well at Lane.

HEDRICK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

2001 API: 8
Percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: 86 percent
Student ethnic demographics: Hispanic–77 percent, Asian American–6 percent, African American–3 percent
Percentage of students who are English learners: 30 percent
Percentage of teachers with emergency credentials or waivers: 0 percent

Chuck Fisher is the personable principal at Hedrick Elementary School located in Imperial County, which sits on the U.S.–Mexican border. Hedrick is the top scoring school in the El Centro school district and the county, and has been for some time.

One of the key reasons for Hedrick's longtime success has been its independence in ignoring the education fad du jour. Mr. Fisher says this was especially the case with the movement to whole-language reading instruction. In general terms, whole-language instruction de-emphasizes letter-sound relationships and focuses on student recognition of whole words. University schools of education, the California Department of Education, and most local districts became uncritical promoters of whole language instruction. Not Hedrick Elementary, however.

Mr. Fisher states:

> Because this school has traditionally been a high-performing school, they have not jumped on a lot of the bandwagons that have come along. Ten years ago, 12 years ago, when whole language started, this school turned its nose up at whole language and the staff said we're not going to jump on this bandwagon, we know what we've been doing has worked, and we're not going to change. So when other schools were doing what the state said they should be doing, this school was holding back and continuing a lot of the tried-and-true methods.

When asked if this tried-and-true method was phonics-based reading, Mr. Fisher said, "Yes, very much so."

In what turned out to be an unintended experimental case study, Hedrick found out first hand the importance of phonics-based instruction. The kindergarten teachers used a phonics-based book called *The Letter Book* while the first- and second-grade teachers used a phonics workbook. According to Mr. Fisher, "They stopped using that material one year and they found that the kids weren't as prepared as they had been, test scores slipped a little bit, so my kindergarten teachers

said, 'Should we order [*The Letter Book*]?'" The concern was not over the success of the phonics book, but the fact that the cost was $80 per book. But they made it a priority to get back to *The Letter Book* while the first-grade and second-grade teachers got back their phonics workbook. Student performance then went back up.

Within this phonics-rich environment, however, the school used the literature-based Signature reading series put out by Houghton Miflin, which, says Mr. Fisher, "is nowhere as phonetic as Open Court." He says that the school adopted the Signature series "about 8 or so years ago when reading was sort of going through that transition phase, when many teachers were doing their own thing with reading." Unlike Open Court, the Signature series is not a scripted program. However, the school switched to Open Court at the beginning of the 2001–02 school year.

The switch occurred because there were a number of schools in the district that had been classified as underperforming by the state accountability system. These schools had to adopt a program, and they adopted Open Court. The district, which included nine elementary schools, then decided to adopt Open Court.

Although it was a pro-phonics school, Mr. Fisher says that teachers at Hedrick were not happy about the prospect of using Open Court: "My teachers felt that what they were doing they were doing well and they resented a new program." In addition, teachers were disappointed that they had not had the chance to give input into the decision to adopt Open Court. In the past when a new program was adopted, teachers had the opportunity to voice their views. However, Open Court was adopted unilaterally by the district superintendent and the district management team.

In what turned out to be an unintended experimental case study, Hedrick found out first hand the importance of phonics-based instruction.

Given the hostility of his teachers to Open Court, Mr. Fisher himself examined the program very closely. He says:

> I did a lot of research after we decided we were going to go with Open Court. I found out that many districts that have gone with Open Court face some obstacles at the beginning. Teachers appear to be pretty negative about the program, but around Christmas time you start hearing some positive comments about the program. And near the end of the first school year you start hearing more positive comments. My teachers fit that mold exactly.

He thinks that teachers became more positive partly because they got used to the Open Court teaching methods and partly because they have seen improvement in student achievement (although they still have not seen the SAT-9 scores for this year).

In the past, teachers at Hedrick have had a lot of autonomy in the way they presented material in the classroom, whereas Open Court is more regimented. Many teachers liked the flexibility of earlier programs and initially felt that Open Court would be dull, tedious, and repetitive. Teachers also felt uncomfortable

with Open Court because, says Mr. Fisher, students in Open Court learn skills in a spiral fashion, that is, if a skill isn't mastered then the student will see that same skill material periodically in the future. He says that it's hard to achieve mastery for all the skills because so many are presented at one time. His teachers are used to having kids master one skill and then move on. The teachers will use the Open Court supplemental material to ensure that students prove skill mastery.

Nevertheless, Mr. Fisher observes: "[Teachers have] become more comfortable with the program. They've seen how they can interject some of their style into it." Further, Mr. Fisher says that he hears from other schools in the district that children are doing lessons by Christmas time that before would not have been covered until springtime.

The district requires schools to pay for Open Court reading coaches out of categorical funds, but Hedrick does not have the amount of categorical dollars that low-performing schools in the district have. So Hedrick and the second-highest-performing school in the district pooled their resources and share a reading coach. Thus, Hedrick has only a half-time reading coach, while the other schools in the district have a full-time coach. Mr. Fisher stresses the importance of the reading coach saying, "One of the keys to the successful implementation of Open Court is having that reading coach-teacher that can demonstrate lessons, talk to the teachers about pacing, answer some of the questions, and give demonstration lessons."

There is also a teacher on staff who is the Open Court resource teacher. Mr. Fisher mentions that the Open Court resource teacher has writing as one of her responsibilities. She goes through all of Open Court, especially the upper grades, pulls out different types of writing that Open Court uses, and presents those to the other teachers. So, for example, if teachers want to focus on persuasive writing, the resource teacher chooses stories in Open Court that would be good subjects for persuasive writing assignments, or Open Court workbook pages that talk about persuasive writing.

"I have been a principal for 12 years and before that I was a teacher for 18 years," says Mr. Fisher. "I've seen many programs come and go, but this has been one of the better implemented programs in our district and it's because of the reading resource coach teacher."

In discussing teaching methodologies, Mr. Fisher says that he has seen the positive results of direct instruction techniques. For instance, he points out that "Even before Open Court, some of my more successful teachers have been direct instruction teachers."

In math, Hedrick previously used the Silver Burdett math series. However, the district recently adopted Harcourt Brace with its explicit standards alignment feature. Harcourt Brace will be used for the 2002–03 school year. Improving student math achievement has been a key goal of the district. Three years ago the district hired a math resource teacher for the entire district. This resource teacher did training in different areas. For example, all fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade teachers received training on integers. Mr. Fisher believes the training has been helpful.

Mr. Fisher and his teachers spend a great deal of time ensuring that the state content standards are met. For instance, there is early dismissal on Thursdays, so teachers meet by grade levels from 2 to 3PM. Mr. Fisher says: "One thing they do is to look over the state standards, look over the material we

have, and decide what material we have in our current text that meets the standards. They align the standards to what we have. They look for areas in which we are deficient." The teachers also share materials that they find to be aligned to the standards. With the standards, Fisher and his teachers have found out that they need to do a great deal more collaborative planning by grade levels and by multi-grade-levels. Mr. Fisher says that these work collaborations "have helped tremendously."

Assessment is an important tool at Hedrick. At grade-level meetings, aggregate test scores are used to see where students are strong and where they are weak. In addition to the state SAT–9, four times a year the district administers a math proficiency test that is based on the state standards. Twice a year there's a district writing test that is not based on the standards. However, the district is trying to get the writing test closer to standards alignment.

When asked about whether the state standards are attainable for his students, Mr. Fisher replied, "Yes, they are." However, he added that in strictly his own opinion, as a former elementary-school teacher, he felt that some of the math standards are too hard for elementary-school children. He would like to see the standards "moved around a little bit."

Mr. Fisher says that Hedrick has extensive teacher development. Because of Open Court all teacher have had three days of professional development devoted to the reading program. Next year three days will be devoted to the new Harcourt Brace math program. The professional development is based mainly on subject matter. Mr. Fisher says that there is exceptional science training partly because of the availability of National Science grant money for science education. For instance, teachers receive a weekly one-day training for a nine week unit. There is also cross-curricular training. And Mr. Fisher says that the district has received a National Science grant for math so there will be professional development after school, on weekends, and during the summer in math.

Regarding discipline, Mr. Fisher says, "This is the third school where I've been a principal, and I probably spend less time on student discipline at this school than the other two." He believes that there is a connection between fewer discipline problems and higher achievement. He also says that other principals in the district have found fewer discipline problems because of the district's adoption six years ago of a student uniform policy. At Hedrick, he enforces strict discipline policies:

> We have rewards and sanctions. You break a rule on the playground, you get a warning and you might have to sit by the fence. You break a rule a second time or you break one of the big rules like throwing rocks and you get a ticket. The ticket goes home, it's signed by mom and dad.

Students, he says, get the message: "You get a ticket, you get a black mark by your name for the rest of the year, so my kids are very careful."

On the rewards side, Hedrick has a wide variety of incentives for students to behave correctly. For instance, Mr. Fisher says:

> Monthly we have student of the month/good student assemblies. We recognize the student of the month for specific attributes. Sometimes it's the most respectful student,

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> or the most self-confident student, or the friendliest student. We try to throw in some things that are not academically based.... We recognize students and classes that do not receive tickets that month. Students who don't receive tickets have their names put into a treasure chest. They may get a $10 gift certificate to Wal-Mart, lunch with the principal, or an ice cream.

In addition, the classrooms that have the fewest tickets get an ice cream party. Also, at the end of the year all students who have not received a ticket are allowed to spend three hours at the city swimming pool.

Parents are very involved at Hedrick. Mr. Fisher says the school is in an established neighborhood with little turnover in population. He says that parents have traditionally been involved in activities such as volunteering in classrooms and going on field trips with students.

When asked what was the chief reason why Hedrick students have performed so well, Mr. Fisher cited three main factors. He said that the school had 100-percent experienced credentialed teachers, with an accent on the experience component. He also said that parental support was key. And finally, he said "good teaching with direct instruction."

In the future, he would like Hedrick to keep the emphasis on the three Rs, but he would also like to work on art and physical education. It would be helpful, he says, to have more control over categorical program funds. If block grant money was available, he could see teachers supporting the use of that money to fund arts education.

VANALDEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

2001 API: 7
Percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: 80 percent
Student ethnic demographics: Hispanic–61 percent, African American–6 percent, Asian American–5 percent, Filipino American–3 percent
Percentage of students who are English learners: 31 percent
Percentage of teachers with emergency credentials or waivers: 7 percent

Vanalden Elementary School is located in Reseda in the San Fernando Valley in the Los Angeles area. The principal is Teri Cooke, a personable, engaging, and friendly woman who demonstrates that one does not have to be a drill sergeant to be a good leader.

Asked about the importance of curricula to student achievement at Vanalden, Ms. Cooke responded, "I think it's of great importance in our students' success." In reading, she says, "We are using Open Court." Whereas the district has been using Open Court for two years, Vanalden has been using it for the past five. Of the initial decision to go to Open Court, Ms. Cooke notes: "We took a long time to make our decision about what language arts series we were going to use and finally we decided and we chose Open Court. We've been happy with it ever since."

Unlike other schools that have gone to Open Court, where teachers opposed the changeover, teachers at Vanalden were not resistant to Open Court. Indeed, according to Ms. Cooke, it was the teachers who were responsible for Vanalden's adoption of Open Court:

> They chose Open Court. Our teachers went out and sought other schools that were using Open Court. On their own time they went out and visited those schools. One of our teachers used it during a summer school session [at another school] and convinced the other teachers to go over and visit the classrooms to see how Open Court was implemented. So they had a lot of input in choosing this series and so they were happy about it.

Once it was adopted, teachers, she says, were delighted with their decision: "On the whole our teachers really did gravitate to it and used it and really enjoyed it." Furthermore, "[Students] have liked it as well."

After teachers mastered the Open Court system, Ms. Cooke says there were few problems. The focus in the primary grades is learning to read while the focus in the upper grades is reading to learn. When it first adopted Open Court, Vanalden implemented the curriculum schoolwide. When asked if older students had more problems with Open Court than younger students because the former had not been exposed to Open Court previously, it turned out that prior to Open Court the school had still emphasized phonics reading instruction.

This meant that the older students did have the phonics background that made their transition to Open Court easier. Ms. Cooke observed at the time, "Even though our district decided that we weren't going to use phonics books, we still bought phonics books for our primary grades." The district was in its whole-language phase and discouraged any phonics materials. Ms. Cooke says that Vanalden, though, was undaunted in its belief in what worked: "We weren't supposed to buy spelling books but we got spelling books. Our primary teachers were really phonics-oriented and they wanted to keep them, so we bought them as a supplement."

"Even though our district decided that we weren't going to use phonics books, we still bought phonics books for our primary grades."

When the district went to Open Court, Vanalden was given a reading coach, but the coach had never taught using Open Court. It turned out that Vanalden's teachers knew more about the program than the coach because they had already been using the program for three years. They have been operating since then without a coach.

Vanalden uses the Accelerated Reader as a supplemental reading program. It is a computerized program where the children take a test, find out their reading level, select books from the school library to read, and then take a test on the computer that measures their comprehension. There is a very lengthy catalogue of books attached to the program. Ms. Cooke says that she and her teachers really like the program because it helps motivate students to read better.

Students are given a lot of incentives to do well in the program: they get points for the level of books they read, they get certificates, and they get their pictures on the wall of the auditorium. "It's developing a love for reading," says Ms. Cooke, "because they're getting a chance to read books other than the ones from their language arts series." Students, she notes, are going through an amazing number of books because of the program. And since the program focuses on comprehension it is a great supplement to Open Court.

Ms. Cooke believes that a key reason for students' higher math scores was their improved reading abilities under Open Court.

In math, Vanalden uses the Scott Foresman math series, which is the choice of the district. According to Ms. Cooke, in Scott Foresman: "They were introducing harder skills at an earlier grade level." For instance, algebraic concepts are introduced in the first grade. Feedback from teachers, however, is that students have really risen to the challenge. Another Vanalden administrator comments that teachers say: "Oh, I didn't think that they would understand that, but they're really grasping it." After seeing the results, teachers like the math series much better. Ms. Cooke says that the math series emphasizes the basics.

Ms. Cooke believes that a key reason for students' higher math scores was their improved reading abilities under Open Court:

> Interestingly enough when we took a look at all of our test scores before we started using this new [math] series, we saw our test scores in math had already gone up. I think a lot has to do with the fact that our students were reading much better. In particular, our third grade zoomed in terms of its math scores. We weren't using a new [math] series at the time.

In fact, many of the classes were using math texts from different publishers so there was no consistency to the math curriculum, but students' math scores still went up across the board. Ms. Cooke concludes, "I think that you can attribute that to the fact that kids are reading better."

Open Court requires frequent assessments, which Ms. Cooke believes are very beneficial to the learning process: "I think that in the long run they are able to monitor student progress a lot better by having those assessments even though they seem to come up so quickly. The assessments give teachers a great deal of information that they can use to see where their students are, and to target those students that need additional help."

In addition to Open Court assessments, at the beginning of the school year Vanalden uses the school's SAT-9 scores as a diagnostic tool to evaluate students' weaknesses and strengths. In this process, grade level planning is critical because it helps the staff to work together. Teachers are able to help each other, which is especially important for new teachers.

Vanalden embraces the state's academic content standards. Standards on which teachers and students are working are posted in the classrooms. Ms. Cooke says, "Teachers are implementing [the standards]

because that is what they're supposed to teach." Asked about whether it is realistic for students to meet the standards, Ms. Cooke says that the standards are a bit difficult for the children at the kindergarten level, but other than that "They're pretty much on target in having high expectations for students."

Once a month the district provides staff development and much of that is standards-based. According to Ms. Cooke, the most important staff development activities at Vanalden are the grade-level meetings where teachers discuss how well they are doing and how to improve.

At Vanalden, teachers are very involved in the hiring process. "They would look at the person," says Ms. Cooke, "not necessarily whether they're fully credentialed, but if someone is going to fit into our family, our way of thinking, our belief that all children can learn." She notes that so far the school has been very successful in picking people. In describing the new hires, she says, "most of them were emergency credentialed." Administrators and teachers want somebody who loves children, wants to help children, and is willing to learn.

Statistics can be deceiving, since a look at the current numbers shows that Vanalden has mostly credentialed teachers. This masks the fact that many teachers with emergency credentials were hired because of their abilities, rather than their possession of a regular credential, and only later went through the process of obtaining the full credential.

Vanalden has few discipline problems. According to Ms. Cooke, among the factors responsible for the lack of such problems: reducing class size in K–3, a fairly stable population, and parents who support the school. She believes that there is "absolutely" a connection between student achievement and discipline: "When you have a child that has a significant problem, usually they're not doing well academically."

If a student has a problem, the school works to improve the child academically. As a result, says Ms. Cooke: "I see a turnaround. All of a sudden they're not in my office anymore, they're not bothering other kids. They have more confidence and greater self-esteem." Students who behave well are rewarded with assemblies, principal's honor roll, character counts awards, and "funny money" that they can use for prizes.

The biggest challenge for Ms. Cooke is a limited budget. For instance, the school's nurse services may be cut. Also programs that have helped students academically, like interventions, afterschool computer club, and homework club, will receive less money, and so keeping achievement high will be more difficult.

In Ms. Cooke's opinion, the main reason for the high performance of Vanalden students is the collaboration of all the staff to work together for a common goal – student achievement. Staff members work late and on Saturdays, and are committed to the children. She says, "The staff is fantastic."

...the main reason for the high performance of Vanalden students is the collaboration of all the staff to work together for a common goal – student achievement.

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SOLANO AVENUE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

2001 API: 7
Percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: 100 percent
Student ethnic demographics: Asian American–64 percent, Hispanic–31 percent, African American–3 percent
Percentage of students who are English learners: 60 percent
Percentage of teachers with emergency credentials or waivers: 7 percent

Solano Avenue Elementary School is located in downtown Los Angeles in the shadow of Dodger Stadium. The school is part of the Los Angles Unified School District (LAUSD). The principal is Richard Hickcox, who is refreshing and admirable in his directness and candor. He has been the principal at Solano Avenue for two years.

Mr. Hickcox says that Solano Avenue has been a successful school for some time, but it has just implemented new reading and math programs. The LAUSD has mandated Open Court as the district reading program. At Solano Avenue, Open Court was instituted in the primary grades last year and in upper grades this year. Prior to Open Court, Solano Avenue used the Harcourt Brace reading program. Like other schools that switched over to Open Court, Mr. Hickcox noted, "The teachers went into Open Court kicking and screaming." However, he says that teachers have reacted professionally and are working hard to implement Open Court well.

Solano Avenue now uses the Harcourt Brace math series. Mr. Hickcox says, "We aren't finding very many problems at all with the math program." Other schools, he notes, have had problems, but not at Solano because "Math is where our kids do the best."

Mr. Hickcox says that it's too early to tell what the impact of Open Court will be on student performance. Their test scores in first grade "went up a bunch" but he still can't say that it's because of Open Court because his second-grade scores went down. Despite their initial opposition, the teachers like Open Court better now that they've had time to get used to the program. Still, Mr. Hickcox says that the large number of limited-English-proficient students at the school makes it difficult because there is a lot of vocabulary in Open Court that children have to pick up.

Regarding the scripted lessons in Open Court, Mr. Hickcox says that the Harcourt Brace reading program was not scripted. The veteran staff knew how to use it. However, he observes that "New teachers can jump right into Open Court and it is very scripted, but it has a really strong phonemic awareness and the kids really, really need that." Harcourt Brace, he points out, did not have a strong phonemic awareness component. On the other hand, he observes that the children at Solano Avenue do a lot of reading and there is less reading of whole books under Open Court. Thus, he says, children in the upper grades do not like Open Court as much as the previous program.

Solano Avenue makes great use of the state's academic content standards. At the beginning of the year, the staff goes through the SAT–9 scores and performance results and looks at general strengths

and weaknesses across all grade levels. Then they identify one reading standard, one math standard, and one writing standard that they decide to work on for the entire year. This year in writing the focus is on content and organization, in reading it is on making inferences, and in math it is on problem-solving strategies.

When Mr. Hickcox visits classrooms and monitors instruction, which is almost daily, he makes notes, goes back to his office, and looks up the standards. He says he almost always finds that the standards are being met:

> The teachers do a really good job of following the standards. And for the first time the course of study matches the standards, which match the textbooks. Finally, you have some sort of order, which wasn't present before.

Solano Avenue uses its professional development time to create standards-aligned activities in the classrooms. For example, at the beginning of the school year, teachers will design an assignment based on a standard, e.g. in reading this year it would be on inference. Then the teachers would design a rubric to score the assignment, give the assignment in the next week, get the results, and tabulate the data to see at every grade level what percentage of students are at or above standards-level performance. Teachers set a goal of what they want to accomplish. They get together and talk about what they are going to do in their classrooms to lift students up to the standards goal.

Solano Avenue uses its professional development time to create standards-aligned activities in the classrooms.

The whole process goes on for a month. Then they start all over again and design another assignment, look at the data, and so on. Mr. Hickcox says: "Every time we've done that we've exceeded our goal. It works." This technique was tried last year in two grade levels and got such good results that it is being used school wide this year. Mr. Hickcox concludes that "Teachers can actually see a result over a relatively short period of time and they can see that their work is producing fruit."

Solano Avenue makes important use of assessment results as a diagnostic tool to help individual students. Once children are identified as needing help, based on assessment results, Mr. Hickcox says, "We need to spend extra time in terms of interventions so we hire a teacher in the day to work an hour after school every day." In the afterschool program, the teacher and the teacher's aide are there to help anyone who wants it, but the arms of students identified as needing help are twisted to ensure that they attend. The arms of those students' parents are also twisted. Attendance is taken at the afterschool program to make sure that the targeted students are there.

Also, the district gives schools specific funds for special intervention programs. For instance, twice a week for eight or 10 weeks a group of teachers will work with 10 students to improve literacy. Mr. Hickcox says that the message to students who are not performing is simple: "We're trying to push

the idea of believing in yourself, working hard, getting smarter. We try to push the idea that how well you do has a lot to do with how much you put into it, how much work you do."

Homework is emphasized. "In the auditorium we have a homework club," he says, and "We have 60 seats and we have about 90 kids who want to get in." Most of the parents at Solano Avenue want their children to have homework.

Solano Avenue, observes Mr. Hickcox, is a magnet for attracting teachers so they have little problem with getting credentialed teachers. Teachers are hired based on the gut feeling that the person will fit in with the school rather than what is on the person's resume. Mr. Hickcox says: "We're looking for work ethic. That's the number one thing. Compatibility, being a team player, working with other people, those are the things we look for." As long as the school gets the right person, he or she can be molded into the school's system of doing things.

"We try to push the idea that how well you do has a lot to do with how much you put into it, how much work you do."

There are hardly any discipline problems at Solano Avenue. Mr. Hickcox says that, among other things, the small size of Solano really helps. The school is a very intimate community. Everyone, staff and students, knows each other.

There are the usual tools of school-site decision making: English language council, compensatory advisory council, and school site council. At the meetings the parents sit and listen. The parents are very respectful of professionals at school, but their actual involvement at the school is, says Mr. Hickcox, disappointing. Their parents are not used to being involved in a school. To help change this situation, Solano Avenue is bringing in people to train parents to be teacher's aides. Mr. Hickcox also points out that attendance by parents is very good for family literacy night, back-to-school night, and math and science night.

When asked about his school's biggest challenge, Mr. Hickcox courageously pulled no punches saying that stifling bureaucracy and mountains of red tape were a huge obstacle:

> The Los Angeles Unified School District, with its top-down bureaucracy and never-ending push for compliance for all kinds of rules that I don't see as related to doing good things for kids, just sucks the time out of you. All the requirements for special ed, even though we have a small special ed population, are so time intensive. All the stuff with Title I and with bilingual, it just drives me nuts.

He says with obvious exasperation: "It takes you away from the things that you really should be doing to be an effective leader. Other than putting the right number in the right box, it doesn't have a real payoff for your school." Categorical programs and their earmarked funds make things more difficult. For example, he says that the school has money in an account for art supplies and all one can buy is state-adopted art materials. The money cannot be shifted to higher priority items. He says that if money came in a block grant, "that would be so helpful."

Mr. Hickcox says that the biggest reason why Solano Avenue is successful is the school's small size. There is a family feeling among the staff. Also, the staff's work ethic is tremendous: people arrive early and go home late. The admiring principal concludes: "They are the best. They are just the best."

HOW TO BROADEN HIGH ACHIEVEMENT: LESSONS FOR LEGISLATORS AND EDUCATORS

The schools profiled in this report have beaten the odds and performed at a high level, not because of luck or the presence of a unique miracle-worker principal, but because they have had the courage to buck fashionable trends in favor of practical, effective, and proven methods of improving student achievement. The principals who head these schools are strong leaders who have a clear vision of what works and does not work in the classroom. They also have the humility to put their beliefs to the test (literally) and to base their course of action accordingly. Unlike the adherents of "progressive" education who religiously stick to theories and methods despite empirical evidence showing them to be ineffective, the principals interviewed for this report focused their efforts on what works in the real world.

Thus a number of the schools ignored the lemming-like stampede toward whole-language reading instruction. They stayed with phonics-based instruction, not because of mindless traditionalism, but because it produced students who could read. Now that state policy has swung back to phonics and large districts like Los Angeles Unified are adopting a phonics-based curriculum, schools like Bennett-Kew, Hedrick, and Vanalden are being vindicated. It is now apparent that these schools were brave keepers of the learning flame.

It is critical to note that virtually all the principals in this report emphasize the importance of the type of curriculum chosen to teach a particular subject. Some of the principals, like Sue Wong at Robert Hill Lane and Chuck Fisher at Hedrick, described the change in student achievement that came with a change in curriculum. It is instructive that those changes often came even though the school personnel stayed relatively the same. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to say that a well-implemented research-proven curriculum is likely the key factor in determining student performance.

It is, therefore, no exaggeration to say that a well-implemented research-proven curriculum is likely the key factor in determining student performance.

Specifically, all the schools profiled in this report use the Open Court reading curriculum. Most are enthusiastic about the program and credit it with improving student reading achievement. Some have been Open Court pioneers, using the program long before it came into its current vogue. A few of the schools are still waiting to see if the program will produce better results for them. But even here there are positive comments about various aspects of the program, such as the emphasis on phonemic awareness and the ability of new teachers to step in and use the program.

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It is important to point out that the principals did have criticisms of the Open Court program. Even supporters like Sue Wong said that it is not easy to keep to the pacing of the lessons under Open Court, especially when students do not have a wide vocabulary. However, despite the criticisms and worries, most say that the benefits of the program outweigh the downsides. Indeed, the fact that Open Court is successful in improving the reading ability of these schools' low socioeconomic students makes the implementation difficulties worth enduring. And the payoff is not just with improved reading scores. As Teri Cooke at Vanalden notes, achievement in other subjects such as math increases as students improve their reading abilities.

The principals were also supporters of teacher-directed instruction. While the bulk of the education community veered toward student-centered techniques, the schools in this report continued to use teacher-centered direct-instruction methods. As Bennett-Kew's Lorraine Fong observed, under direct-instruction methods, teachers teach to an academic goal, something that is not always apparent in classes where teachers are using student-centered methods.

One of the crucial teaching goals for each of the schools is meeting the state academic content standards. Every school had well-planned strategies to ensure that students acquire standards-based knowledge. Typical was the observation of Hudnall's Dr. Norma Baker: "Everything we have here is content standards driven." Most principals said that the standards were attainable for their students and that if high expectations are set, students rise to those expectations.

The principals also embraced the need for frequent testing to discover the strengths and weaknesses of both students and teachers. Without testing, as Payne's Debbie Tate says, one cannot know whether "Johnny needs help with spelling" or whether "Johnny is not decoding right." Testing produces data and in order to know the needs of students, she rightly says, "You really have to use data."

The schools also have similar types of teacher professional development. The focus is usually on subject matter and implementation of the state standards. There is a no-nonsense quality to the professional development at these schools. The precious few days available for staff development must be used in a way that will increase student achievement. Solano Avenue's use of staff development days to create standards-aligned activities and the resulting payoff of higher student performance is just one example.

The schools also have similar types of teacher professional development. The focus is usually on subject matter and implementation of the state standards.

Most of the schools put more stock in the qualities of the teacher or the teacher applicant than whether that person has a regular teaching credential. Many of the principals actually preferred emergency credentialed teachers. Most certainly did not view emergency credentialed teachers as necessarily the weak link in the learning process. Intelligence, open-mindedness, and willingness to learn, not a paper credential, were the qualities that the principals sought in a teacher. As Kelso's Jane Moore said, "the most important thing to me is that you come with an open mind and

you are flexible, you come with a good transcript, a real strong work ethic, and you are willing to be taught."

None of the schools profiled reported major discipline problems. Although various factors were cited for this, including smaller school size and reduced class size, most agreed that higher student achievement translated into higher student self-esteem, which resulted in fewer disciplinary problems. Also, if there were problems, the schools had strong policies to deal with poor behavior. Payne's Debbie Tate lays down the law, saying that she will not allow a disruptive child to interfere with the learning process: "That's one thing I don't tolerate and I let all the teachers know that you're not going to let one kid take the learning away from 32." On the flip side, as opposed to progressive theorists who argue against extrinsic rewards for children, the schools make available many incentives for good behavior.

The principals all emphasized the involvement of parents in the education of their children. Chuck Fisher of Hedrick listed it as one of the key reasons why his school and students have done so well. The strategies used to increase parental involvement ran an impressive gamut and demonstrated that the schools were truly interested in making parents their partners in the education process.

The challenges cited by the principals were intriguing. Of course, budget limitations were a constant theme. However, it was not just a case of "give me more." Principals indicated that how education dollars were spent was as important as how much. Vanalden's Teri Cooke pointed to programs that have helped her students improve academically that will now receive less funding. Earmarked funds from state categorical programs were also decried as limiting the freedom and flexibility of schools to spend money on top priority items. Solano Avenue's Richard Hickcox favored block granting the categorical funds to increase flexibility. Lane's Sue Wong was exasperated by all the compliance paperwork associated with categorical programs. Mr. Hickcox also criticized the strangling bureaucratic rules of his own district.

In addition to curriculum and teaching methods, many of the principals cited teacher quality as a key reason why their students have performed so well. The teachers are dedicated and talented. They are willing to put in long hours on school days and weekends. They are willing to do whatever it takes to help students. As Richard Hickcox says, "They are just the best."

For lawmakers and education policymakers, then, there are a number of lessons to be learned from these schools that have overcome high poverty to achieve high performance. First of all, excuses such as low income, family background, racial diversity, limited English proficiency, and standardized test bias are invalid and should be ignored. Schools can overcome these challenges by focusing on key factors that include:

- Empirically proven research-based curricula.
- Empirically proven research-based teaching methods.
- Comprehensive use of the state academic content standards as goals for student learning, guideposts for teaching, and tools for professional development.
- Use of frequent assessment as a diagnostic tool for identifying student and teacher strengths and weaknesses, and for improving student and teacher performance.

- Standards-based professional development that emphasizes subject matter.
- Teacher quality and teacher willingness to use proven curricula and methods.
- Strong discipline policies that emphasize sanctions and rewards.
- Increased flexibility to use available funding and reduction in bureaucratic rules.

If all public schools, their districts, and the state adopted these strategies, the quality of education for California's children would rise quickly and dramatically. The principals cited in this report have described what works. The next step should be to replicate their reforms in all of the state's under-achieving schools.

As these schools prove, there are no excuses for failure.

NOTES

1 Mark C. Shug, Sara G. Tarver, and Richard D. Western, "Direct Instruction and the Teaching of Early Reading," Wisconsin Policy Research Institute Report, Vol. 14, No 2, March 2001: p. 3.

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